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ABSTRACT

This monograph presents what illiterate and formerly illiterate adults have said regarding what it is like to be unable to read in a world that presumes everyone is literate, and of experiences they have had while acquiring the ability to read and write. In later chapters the authors, who were involved in the Vermont Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, address issues that learners find more difficult to deal with. Chapter 1 provides adult learners' views of what it is (and is not) like to be illiterate. Topics considered include mythologies of literacy, realities of the mythology, realities of illiteracy, coping with illiteracy, and realities of literacy. Chapter 2 concerns what it is like to decide to become literate. Both constraining forces and facilitating factors are discussed. Chapter 3 focuses on what the process of becoming literate is like, who can support this process, and how. It addresses the necessary unlearning and relearning and what is learned. Chapter 4 then describes how the Vermont Adult Basic Education Program integrated home-based tutorial instruction with more traditional methods of delivering adult basic education. (YLB)

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THE ADULT ILLITERATE SPEAKS OUT: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE

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May 22, 1977

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Written by a 28-year-old man in northwestern Vermont who was learning basic literacy skills with the help of a volunteer tutor.

FOREWORD

"The Adult Illiterate Speaks Out" is a unique document, in some senses a miracle: Illiterates have written. These adults tell us what it is like to be unable to read in a world that presumes everyone is literate and of the experiences they have had while acquiring the power to read and write. They use their own words and the literacy skills of Ann Eberle and Sandra Robinson to communicate with those of us who *can* read. Their story is one of despair, hope, struggle, and elation as a long-sought-after goal is finally reached. Their story also helps us understand the changes and demands that they will put on us who want to assist others in becoming literate.

Drawing largely from conversations and interviews with illiterate and formerly illiterate adults, Eberle and Robinson bring the words of the illiterate to the printed page. They have been careful not to be overly analytic, but to let the adults speak of experiences and feelings that literate adults find hard to comprehend. They speak of the sense of helplessness, the fear of discovery, and the apprehension of beginning to change their lives.

Later on, the authors use their own words to carry the parts of the story that learners find more difficult to deal with. Reflecting on their decade of experience in a State Adult Basic Education Program, they recall how the entire state program was radically transformed to meet the learners' needs rather than those of the program designers and state administrators.

This monograph has a history. Its story was first told to a group of staff members at the National Institute of Education (NIE) during the spring of 1979, as we viewed the film "What If You Couldn't Read?"* The film presents the simple, powerful story of a middle-aged man from Vermont who had never been able to read or write. He graduated from high school almost 20 years ago, raised a family, and supported them by farming. Several years ago, he came to the decision that he wanted to learn to read and write and to use these skills to start a new career. In simple, direct, and moving terms, he and his wife tell the story of what it was like before, during, and after the literacy learning experiences.

As we watched and discussed the film, we raised a number of questions. While we felt the power of the message, we realized that it should be available in the print medium so that it could get to the many people who would not have the opportunity to view it. Could we transform its power and presence to a written report? We also wondered about the larger context, at least of a state-level program, in which this person's experience took place. What

*"What If You Couldn't Read?," a film by Dorothy Tod, 16mm, 28 minutes, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, N.J. 07417.

events and forces had shaped the program to enable this learning to happen? Finally, we wondered if this one man's story were typical of some cross-section of illiterates.

The third piece of the history included the extensive planning and development that NIE was beginning in the areas of literacy and adult learning. While the planning effort required a number of analytical reports, we also believed that some of the material ought to focus on the richness of individual experiences, with less emphasis on analysis.

The result was an agreement with Ann Eberle and Sandra Robinson to commit to paper the experiences of many adults with whom they had worked over the last half-decade. We asked them to preserve the richness of the experiences that had not been committed to writing, and to help a reader understand what it is like to be illiterate and to become literate. In so doing, we hoped to bridge a communications gap between literates and nonliterates.

Each reader will, hopefully, gain many insights from the account of these adults' experiences. In particular, we would like to call attention to the reasons why illiterate adults do and do not avail themselves of the opportunities offered at public expense to help them develop essential literacy skills. The problem is most acute among those with less than high school education—less than 4 percent of the eligible population enroll in a given year. In a recent review of over 30 studies of participation in adult education, Patricia Cross categorized the many reasons why individuals reported that they did not or could not participate.** Three kinds of barriers dominate:

- *Situations:* The life circumstances the adult finds her/himself in, including job/family responsibilities, financial resources, time, child care needs, transportation problems, and the like.
- *Institutions:* The scheduling, location, structure, fee schedules, course offerings, and other circumstances for learning established by the educational institutions.
- *Dispositions:* Attitudes toward and perceptions of oneself as a learner (e.g., older adults and those with poor educational backgrounds have little interest in going to school, and do not believe they are able to learn).

Cross suggests that most surveys uncover the situational and institutional barriers to participation not only because of their reality, but because of the social acceptability and desirability of the responses. Dispositional barriers are less often cited and are also less socially acceptable. Few people like to admit that they are not interested in learning or that they do not think they are able to learn. Another reason for the infrequent citation of dispositional barriers is that most surveys ask only those who *are* interested in education what barriers they perceive. One might expect large counts of dispositional barriers among those who are not interested in further education. Cross notes:

> And there is ample evidence that the so-called disadvantaged, precisely the group policy makers are interested in reaching, are overrepresented among those expressing no interest in education. Taking survey results at face value is quite likely to

**Cross, K. Patricia, "A Critical Review of State and National Studies of the Needs and Interests of Adult Learners," in *Adult Learning Needs and the Demand for Lifelong Learning*, Charles Stalford (ed.), Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, November 1978.

overestimate the participation that would result from financial grants to learners and to underestimate the amount of effort that would be required to overcome dispositional barriers. (p. 15)

The illiterate and formerly illiterate adults introduced in this monograph—Lou, Annabelle, Ginny, Rafer, and Mr. X—speak eloquently of how the complex of dispositions, institutions, and situations came together in their lives to keep them from reading and writing. We hope that the teachers, administrators, legislators, and others who read their stories and share their experiences will have a greater understanding and sensitivity to the personal issues and agonies that these learners and the millions like them experience.

This monograph is one of several being published under the auspices of NIE's Adult Learning Team, Education in the Home, Community, and Work Unit, Program on Teaching and Learning. A second is *Adult Development and Approaches to Learning*, with contributions by Harry Lasker and James Moore on "Current Studies of Adult Development: Implications for Education," and by Edwin L. Simpson on "Adult Learning Theory: A State of the Art." The third is *APL Revisited: Its Uses and Adaptations in States*, with contributions by Joan Keller Fischer on "Competencies for Adult Basic Education and Diploma Programs: A Summary of Studies and Cross-reference of Results," and by Walter Haney and Lloyd David on "The APL Study: Science, Dissemination, and the Nature of Adult Education."

Further information about the Institute's research program in adult learning can be obtained from Jerome Lord of the Adult Learning Team, National Institute of Education, 1200 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20208, (202) 254-5706.

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PREFACE

This paper addresses four aspects of adult illiteracy in contemporary America:

1. What it is (and is not) like to be illiterate.

2. What it is like to decide to become literate.

3. What the process of becoming literate is like, who can support this process, and how.

4. How the Vermont Adult Basic Education (ABE) program integrated home-based tutorial instruction with more traditional methods of delivering adult basic education.

We have found that the ability or willingness of adult students to think about and discuss these topics decreases in the order in which they are listed, so that the bulk of the evidence for what is presented in chapter 1 comes from students themselves. Many are graphically articulate in this matter. Chapters 2 and 3 have required an increasing mixture of observations culled from the experience of Vermont ABE staff in serving and listening to these students. Chapter 4 consists entirely of our programmatic perspective in discussing the kinds of program and fiscal/policy decisions that the experience of illiterate adults and ABE staff have compelled the Vermont ABE program to face and make.

There is an emphatic "we" in the narrative of this monograph, and it seems important to identify that "we" as briefly and clearly as possible. The Vermont ABE program serves a population about 70 percent of which is described by the U.S. Census as rural, with over 40 percent of adults over 25 years of age *not* having finished high school. As the *Vermont Plan 1980-1983* for ABE, May 1979, states, "at least 200,000 illiterate or functionally illiterate adults in Vermont would not be at all unrealistic."

The Vermont ABE program has acknowledged that problems of transportation, work, childcare, health, money, energy, fear, and communications comprise natural barriers to most organized learning opportunities for adults, and that in rural Vermont these are compounded by geography (the mountainous nature of the state), weather (severe winters and often impassable roads in fall and spring), and lack of the community resources that are often found in cities and large towns. In addition, adults who lack literacy skills probably cannot or will not go to a school or other public place to attend a class, either because of these physical problems or out of fear generated by past failures.

All of these impediments have created what is often perceived to be an "attendance" problem, the solution to which is better "recruitment," i.e., getting people into night classes. Traditional solutions to "attendance" problems require the student to fit the program, learn in groups if at all, and come to a designated place to learn, at designated times. They usually have been designed with the convenience and assumed cost-efficiency of the *program* in mind. The constellation of delivery systems developed in Vermont is an attempt to make the program conform not merely to "the students," but to each *individual* student, to provide learning opportunities in a place, time, and style comfortable to the student.

Our examination of what was getting in the way for illiterate students who needed and wanted learning opportunities led the Vermont ABE program to conclude that more flexible delivery systems were imperative, especially those that enabled learning to take place in the home. Five years ago, the first efforts to provide instruction in homes proved successful. Enrollment figures doubled in 2 years. In FY 1978, over 56 percent of all students served by the Vermont ABE program were served at home (2,483 students, more than the *total* number served by the Vermont program as a whole in FY 1974), either by staff home tutors, volunteer tutors trained by ABE, or a correspondence course for advanced students (only about 80 percent of all students in FY 1978).

A program designed to fit students, rather than having students fit it, is at heart individualized, goal-oriented instruction. The student's own learning goals (which change, requiring ever new responses), whether scoring a bowling sheet or opening a checking account, whether communicating with a distant relative or comparison shopping, form the basis for her/his own literacy instruction. The instruction need not be generalized for or authorized by a group of other learners: If it fits one learner, that is its justification.

Any educational program has values. Stating these values reduces the inclination toward manipulation of students to conform to the values—perhaps especially true for illiterate adults, who are vulnerable in their relationship to those who "have" literacy skills. Because people who want or need something will jump through a certain number of hoops to get it, the temptation is always not to question the hoops: in this case, these may be standardized reading materials not particularly relevant to a specific student's actual life; standardized testing that provides statistical data to justify and prolong a program's existence but depresses a student who was demoralized by such instruments in his/her school experience; or insistence that instruction be offered only at times and places selected by and convenient to the "teachers."

The stated values of Vermont ABE place responsibility for making decisions and generating energy for the learning process squarely with the student, even when the student would prefer to abdicate this responsibility to the "teacher." We cope with this resistance in part by helping the student look at the ways in which (s)he naturally goes about learning other things that (s)he needs to know in life aside from literacy—e.g., how to change a tire, how to sew an afghan together, how to can tomatoes, how to build stairs to the basement—and accepting those natural, nonacademic ways in the pursuit of literacy as well.

We *claim* to do "whatever the student wants to do." Do we do it? As regards chosen subject matter, yes, quite well (sometimes despite definite clashes of cultural values, as when a student wants to gain information or skills for hunting, while the tutor does not believe in shooting wild animals). In the area of materials and methods, we try gradually to allow the student to

experience new ways of learning. Otherwise (s)he can only "choose" what (s)he already experienced in school, no matter how painful that was. School and education have remained synonymous for the student who may never have received any affirmation either from her/himself or from anyone else for all the skills and information (s)he has gained throughout adult life. If a student still chooses a workbook after experiencing some other choices...then it is just accepted.

The question may arise whether illiteracy is basically a different phenomenon in a rural and an urban setting. We believe not. While the specific "hassles" that illiterates encounter in the two settings may vary in detail, and while the delivery systems for responding to their learning needs may vary, neither the need for literacy nor the learning process is substantially different in the two situations.

Jonathan McKallip, who has worked in literacy for years in Maine and has since joined the national staff of Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. (enabling him to observe illiterates in many urban and quasi-urban settings), agrees (McKallip and Crouch, 1979). He feels that the only meaningful difference is that in small rural communities, where everyone knows everyone else, the fear of everyone in town knowing about their educational deficiency and the concomitant need for confidentiality are much more prevalent. In urban areas, adult learners, even if they congregate at a "learning center," can retain their anonymity merely by fading back into the city. Jinx Crouch, also on the LVA staff, adds that urban people may be more accustomed to using services, especially government services, whereas an overt or covert suspicion of government programs in rural areas can hinder access to ABE and other education programs.

Kathleen Kelly, assistant director of educational programs and international publishing at Laubach Literacy International, reports that at a recent national conference of the National Affiliation for Literacy Advance (the American membership organization of Laubach), a speaker observed that you can now be literate in one place in this country and travel 3 hours and be illiterate (Laubach and Kelly, 1979). Employment, marriage, health, and many other factors serve to keep the American populace highly mobile. Many illiterates in either rural or urban settings attempt to create their own circumscribed environment by remaining within an area where they know all the landmarks and many of the people so that they will not be faced with situations in which they must respond unaided to totally unfamiliar circumstances. Eventually, however, most fail to maintain this protection. The urban illiterate may become the rural illiterate or vice-versa in an alarmingly short time, and each is always at risk in being found in unfamiliar circumstances.

The observations and conclusions in this paper, except where specifically ascribed to others, are based on the experience of the Vermont ABE program, especially during the past 5 years. This experience includes the testimony and learning process of thousands of adults. Yet, we cannot assert strongly enough that illiterate adults are *not* a homogeneous group—to the extent that there is probably no single statement that could be made about them (including the thousands of such statements already committed to print) that would be true for every illiterate person.

The more we have worked with adult learners, the more clearly we have been reminded of the uniqueness of each one—of the abilities (s)he does have, as well as the skills (s)he lacks; of her/his rough or highly sophisticated ways of coping; of the complex variety of "reasons"

for his/her illiteracy in a culture where everyone is presumed literate; of the intensely individual and vulnerable aspirations that accompany each person's hope and effort to become literate; and of the unique accommodations each has made to the limitations of opportunity and damaged self-esteem incurred by one who is helpless where others are competent.

For these and many more reasons that make each adult illiterate special, we have tried to say *some* illiterates feel, speak, act, or cope like this because there are always others who do not. We respect those differences as deeply as the similarities. And while we need to observe, understand, and even occasionally tabulate the commonalities, we never presume to speak for or about all illiterate adults. Whatever we say here, there are always some others for and about whom our observations (and even those verbatim ones of other illiterate adults) are simply not true.

Anne Eberle
Sandra Robinson
Vermont ABE Program

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1. WHAT IT IS (AND ISN'T) LIKE TO BE ILLITERATE

Adult illiterates in America have to contend with a seemingly endless succession of overt difficulties, ranging from the inconvenience of dealing exclusively with cash rather than checks, to the embarrassment of having personal letters read aloud to them, to the danger of misinterpreting instructions on medicine bottles. More importantly, unspoken, largely unacknowledged, behind virtually every encounter of an illiterate with her/his print-saturated culture are covert attitudes, assumptions, and myths that radically affect and even dominate all such transactions and relationships. Each myth, while related to a kernel of truth, may be partly, largely, or completely untrue for a given individual. Yet it has the power to frustrate and limit individuals' hopes and opportunities because it remains subconsciously "true" in the minds of the public and because, in the face of such widespread assumptions, illiterate persons themselves "buy" the myths and act on them as if they were true. Thus they are perpetuated.

Mythologies of Literacy

In this section, we examine several of the myths of illiteracy and their effects on the estimated 23 million adults whom they allegedly describe and whose lives they effectively circumscribe. We listen to illiterates' own words describing their lives in the hopes of hearing both in and behind their words how they cope with these societal attitudes. What survival strategies have they devised to face them? How might things be different?

Lurking behind all the other myths is one colored red, white, and blue—an American faith in the efficacy of dollars and a concomitant assumption that teaching (purchased with dollars) is the same as learning. It goes this way: We all know how expensive our schools are to build, equip, staff, and operate and how high our school taxes are. We have bought the best schools and teachers that money can buy. Everyone has to go to school until the age of 16. Everyone who has been exposed to all that teaching for all those years must have done an equal amount of learning (since, in the public mind, teaching and learning are Siamese twins, while in fact they may be distant cousins). Therefore, those who did not learn after we spent all that money must have something wrong with them. As Carman Hunter puts it, "They're considered dumb. Everybody had a chance. They didn't learn. They didn't make it when the rest of us did" (Hunter, 1979).

Out of this basic faith or hope that dollars buy teaching that, in turn, automatically results in learning come the assumptions that most painfully affect the daily lives of adult illiterates. At the top of the list is the "dummy image." It permeates relationships once a person's illiteracy is

detected, and it is clearly one of the reasons why people are reluctant to let others know that they cannot read. It may be tolerable to reveal that you lack a particular skill that other people may have (you crochet and I can't, you play the banjo but I never learned). Yet it is sometimes unbearably painful to know that, as soon as people realize that you cannot read, they "instamatically" assume you are a moron, no matter what you say or do that might otherwise suggest that you are not.

A recent radio interview on Station WIRD, Syracuse, with a student being tutored in the Laubach Literacy program, evoked a mature adult's reaction to the dummy image.

> INTERVIEWER: *Mr. X, why do you want to remain anonymous?*
>
> MR. X: *Well, right off the bat, if somebody can't read, people instamatically figure that he's stupid, or that he's dumb or that there's something wrong with him mentally. And the major reason why I don't want to be called by my regular name is, I guess you'd call it: fear. Not being able to read is 20th century leprosy, is what it is, because people treat you different. Like if my boss would find out, I'd lose a lot of credit in his eyes. I've told friends. After I tell my friends, the next thing I know, they go out of their way to explain things to me, they start pointing this out to me that they didn't use to point out to me. Maybe you won't understand that. Let me explain it to you. Before you know it, you're being treated as a kid, as half what you used to be treated. That's the major reason why I'm staying as Mr. X.* (Curtis, 1979)

This is a man whose boss knows and trusts his skills, whose friends know and like him as a person. In spite of this, and in spite of every demonstration he has ever made or will make of his intelligence and capacity to function effectively, Mr. X knows from experience that his entire status and esteem before employer, friends, colleagues, and even family would be irrevocably diminished by the revelation that he cannot read and write well.

There *are* illiterate adults whose intelligence level is not high, who in today's euphemisms would be called slow learners. And it may be that some of the slowest learners have been less concerned to hide their illiteracy, while those like Mr. X, who know in their own hearts that they are brighter than the stereotype of an illiterate, hide their inability. Thus the grain of truth becomes generalized in the public mind. The tragedy is that while some illiterate adults are "slow learners," many others are illiterate for a host of reasons unrelated to IQ, and do not fit the stereotype at all. These, as Mr. X testifies, are "treated as a kid, as half what you used to be treated," as soon as their difficulty with reading and writing is revealed.

Following in this progression from faith in a costly school system to the assumption that anyone who has failed to become literate in the costly school system must be a dummy is the myth that those who cannot read well must be incompetent in everything. The effects of this are especially borne out in people's vocational experiences and in some illiterates' awareness that other skills and experience they have may compensate for their illiteracy. But they assert this in ways that demonstrate their need to prove to someone, perhaps anyone, that they are, in fact, capable individuals. If illiterate, the burden of proof is on them.

Because the majority of people do manage to become literate during their years of compulsory schooling (and perhaps because we are a Nation with an extraordinary ability to label

right or normative the opinions, experiences, and capacities of a majority), it is generally assumed that Everyone Can Read. Other assumptions of what "everyone" can do are now being challenged where the minority, in being vocal, can maintain or even enhance their self-esteem. For instance, public buildings that were designed with the assumption that "everyone" can walk up and down stairs must now, by law, provide facilities for those who cannot, because the handicapped have been insistent and articulate about their needs and rights. Many meetings and entertainments that for years were conducted on the assumption that "everyone" can hear now provide sign language interpreters for the deaf, who have let their inability to deal with the normal oral means of communication be known.

Although some illiterates do not mind letting other people find out that they cannot read or write well, not many are willing to raise a hue and cry about their handicap or be identified publicly as illiterates. Perhaps this, in part, is because being unable to walk or hear is assumed to be a misfortune that *happens to* a person. But being illiterate is assumed to be the person's own fault, an affliction that could have been avoided by paying attention in school and is now an unnecessary burden to society as evidenced by rising unemployment and welfare rolls. So although an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the adult population of the United States cannot read well enough to make sense of everyday messages like employment and grocery ads, the vast majority of Americans still believe that Everyone Can Read. The truth is more nearly that a great many American citizens cannot read very well, but that those who cannot do not say so, or at least not very loudly.

This makes saying so very difficult for many illiterates. An adult learner in Vermont put it this way.

> ANNABELLE: *I think that the hardest part sometimes is just admitting. Facing it, really. Facing the problem of you can't do it. There's a lot of times you try to cover it up—even though it ain't nothing to be ashamed of. I think, really, sometimes you think it is. You are mostly all right with yourself; it's just when you have to face somebody else, that's when it gets a little bit different.* (Cole, 1976, p. 189)

Annabelle knows that *not* Everyone Can Read, that she cannot, but also that she has some other things going for her. So she is "all right with" herself. But it is in dealing with others who assume that everyone can read (and therefore that any astonishing exception must be a dummy) that "it gets a little bit different": people who learn that Annabelle cannot read will assume some very uncomplimentary things about her that she does not assume about herself, but she really has no way to combat their inferences; she is just uncomfortable about being so vulnerable as to let them have the information about her that will enable them to make the inferences.

Realities of the Mythology

The power of these myths lies partly in the fact that many illiterates themselves accept them as *true* and act on them. This in turn defines their expectations for themselves and limits their capacity to make a change.

LEM: *All through my school days, they knew I couldn't read. Thought I was stupid. They always said I was too stupid to learn. I knew I weren't too smart. I couldn't read.* (Cole, 1976, p. 246)

FREIDA: *I always had trouble in school, you know. I can remember that from way back. I didn't pay attention because I didn't understand it. I goofed off. I don't know how I even graduated out of eighth grade. I really don't. They probably wanted to get rid of me. It's my own fault, really. You know, not paying attention in school when I should have been...I didn't care if I learned or not.* (Cole, 1976, p. 111)

Another Vermont adult learner, asked to describe herself, replied in part:

GINNY: *I wouldn't know how to. Somebody else would have to do it, because I wouldn't know how to do it. Well, I'm somebody that doesn't know anything. I'm not too smart, I think that's about it. Somebody else could probably describe me a lot better than that. I never had the education other women has had.* (Cole, 1976, p. 63)

The message has not always been delivered verbally, but it has been effective: If you can't read, you're a dummy. We provided those nice (expensive) schools, and you didn't learn even though the other children managed to. You must be incapable of learning.

Dennis, another Vermont learner, sees himself in part as he has been treated, as a strange minority in a nation where Everyone Can Read. There is a kind of wonder in his chronicling of his progress after being tutored twice a week for 2 years, as if it is quite astonishing that he, who finds reading difficult when all the rest of the world finds it simple, should have made these inroads against the forbidding printed world of telephone directories, TV Guide, and a driver's license. One doubts that Dennis is aware that there are millions and millions of adults like him.

DENNIS: *Now I have a tutor from Adult Basic Education. She's helping me learn what I never learned through school. She's good....I see (her) twice a week, and I've seen her about 2 years now....I think I've come a long ways. Most people can read. Most people find it very easy, but to me, I found it very hard. It's nice now to go in, and I can fill out an application for a job without help sometimes. I can fill out my name, where I live, my Social Security number, telephone number. I can read that now, but I couldn't before. I know the alphabet by this time. I'll even be watching TV or looking through a book and I see something I know how to read. Years ago, I wouldn't even look at the TV Guide, I'd just turn the stations till I found what I wanted. Now I look in the TV Guide and find out. And I did get my license.* (Cole, 1976, p. 143)

Behind the words of Dennis, Lem, Freida, Annabelle, and Ginny is a struggle for self-esteem in a culture that only grudgingly, if at all, holds any esteem for the dummy who cannot read. Self-esteem is extraordinarily difficult to maintain if it can only be done by creating an elaborate subterfuge to fool the world.

Realities of Illiteracy

It is not the myths alone that make life a steeple-chase for illiterate adults. The myths simply compound the impressive obstacles posed by the inability to read, write, and figure. The illiterate is surrounded with assumptions that reduce rather than increase her/his capacity to make choices that could result in changing the situation. The effects of illiteracy itself are impressive enough: the fear generated by the illiterate's continual vulnerability as (s)he moves through a world where others understand and act on the written word while (s)he cannot, and lack of control forced on anyone who must depend on others in every aspect of his or her life.

> LOU: *It's a frightening feeling not to be able to...ah not to be able, well for example, if something is written on the screen, a movie screen or a television screen, and you can't read it, you don't know what's going on. You just never know what's going on unless someone tells you. It's a scary feeling, really. You just feel so backward, so out of place a lot of times.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 1)

The fear is real. The consequences of the illiterate's helplessness can involve being and feeling lost, literally and perhaps otherwise.

> LEM: *I never learned to read. The hardest thing about it is I've been places where I didn't know where I was. If you don't know where you are, and you can't read something, you're lost. It sure ain't fun to be lost. I never told anybody I couldn't read. They knew anyway. When I went to court or something and they asked me to fill something out, I'd have to tell them I can't do it. Have to tell them my story.* (Cole, 1976, p. 246)

There is always the high potential for that gut-level loss of control which in some form haunts us all.

> ANNABELLE: *Once, I got stuck, and I had to fill out some papers, and nobody was with me. I was by myself and I just told the guy, "Gee, I can't do it," and he said, "I can't do it for you, you'll have to do it yourself," and I said, "I can't." Then I broke down, crying. Really, it bothered me, and I was so nervous over it.* (Cole, 1976, p. 189)

The same student talks about dependence, here for transportation, but a heavier burden because it characterizes so many relationships for illiterate adults, so many situations in which they really have no options.

> ANNABELLE: *It makes it harder when you don't have a license. I could use it. There have been more times if I had a license, I could use it. You keep depending onto somebody to take you here or depend on somebody to go somewhere or something like that, and you feel like they could be doing something else. Or it ends up they feel sorry for you. Really, sometimes they want to do it, but not all the time. They got their own families, they have their own life to live. When you have to depend on somebody all the time, to doing something like that for you, it makes it harder for them, it makes it harder for you. I like to try to do things for myself if I can, and if I can't, why, I depend on somebody.* (Cole, 1976, p. 191)

Lou talks about his feelings faced with this kind of dependence on others. His language reveals the fear of being "used" or manipulated that so many illiterates express in different ways. Some kinds of dependence can be healthy, others destructive. But the illiterate does not have a choice in the matter: if the landlord claims the lease says he can evict you if your baby cries, you have to believe him. Or the consequences of asserting some kind of choice may be too costly: if the landlord threatens to evict you under terms in your lease and you have to admit you cannot read in the course of maneuvering for time to get someone else to read the lease for you, your helplessness in that relationship is immediately projected into the indefinite future.

> LOU: *You know, when you depend on another person it's so...always find your whole life seems to depend on somebody else, what they do for you, what they...how they use it. And you don't feel like you accomplish anything for anybody, not even yourself.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, pp. 15-16)

For most illiterates, whatever their school experience was, they have a keen recollection of its particulars and a sense of its generic relationship to their situation as adults. Whatever did or did not happen in school has had a radical effect on the rest of their lives, and at some level they know it.

> RAFER: *I was a real terror when I started school. I went in there and had a hard time with it, and didn't really understand what was going on. All it seemed to me like was, you know, these people here were making me do something that I didn't want to do, and it seemed like a lot of work. I didn't want to do it, and I was having a hard time doing it when I did try doing it, so I just got mad and I didn't do anything.* (Cole, 1976, p. 98)

The words "real terror," "hard time with it," "didn't want to," "just got mad" evoke the conflict between a kid and a system that so many illiterates remember in different ways. The system is designed for Most Children, but the Rafers and Annabelles and Ginnys who do not fit either have to be made to fit or find their own way of surviving until they are 16 and can legally abandon the conflict, often to the relief of school personnel who have found their presence "disruptive."

> ANGUS: *I come out of school...when I was 16. I went to _____ to school, and the village of _____ said I was wasting their money to go to their school, so my ma says, "Okay," and she brought me out of school. They had their meetings, and everything...I can't think now what they call them, when the directors meet. They had a meeting about me! And they said I was wasting their school paper, and I was wasting their pencils.* (Cole, 1976, p. 169)

Annabelle, even as a kid in primary school, sensed that the teacher, the school, wanted to work with winners.

> ANNABELLE (in school, where she had a speech impediment, after her palate was surgically removed): *I was trying to talk all over and a lot words just bothered me to talk and it was hard and the teacher didn't want to take any attention. She didn't want to bother to find out what I'm saying. If she asked me something, and I tried to*

answer her the best way I could, she just didn't want to take any attention. She just didn't want to bother with me, and that was it. She says she got the rest, the other kids, to take care of, and she didn't want to take care of just one. She just wanted to work with the kids who can do things and that's it. And if anybody can't do it, well, that's too bad for them. (Cole, 1976, p. 193)

There is no particular need to flog the schools for these situations. In fact many schools, since the time of Annabelle's childhood, have vastly improved their capacity to respond effectively to the youngsters who do not fit an educational system designed for the majority. What is necessary is to perceive the attitudes, especially the self-image, engendered in adult illiterates by their school experiences. These enduring attitudes, almost more than the ability or inability to recognize the sound of "m," substantially define their ability *now*, at whatever age, to see themselves as potential learners again—not only as supplicants for education, but as capable of learning, of gaining skills, and of applying those skills in ways that will actually make a difference in their circumstances.

Angus was wasting the school's paper and pencils by his very presence. It may be that only one or two people felt this way and that others would have liked to help Angus more, but Angus's own certainty is that he was not worthy of the school's time, energy, and materials. Another nonreader, a woman in western Vermont, said that she had come to realize that she was doing wrong to take up the space in her small primary school and should leave so that someone better could have her place. She did leave.

She and Angus, in their separate places, go about trying to learn 20 and more years later what they were unworthy to learn as children because they did not grasp it quickly. It is as if a time machine spun them backwards until their present learning effort is but a day or two removed from that early failure. Despite all the skills they have gained since then for survival, parenting, and earning a living, as adult learners they step directly out of the school door through which they were briskly ushered and into the present struggle to learn. What they bring most instinctively to the present effort to gain literacy skills (and, eventually, literacy) is the feelings, the failures, and the inadequacy of those early losing battles. If they are to have access during this new learning process to the courage and confidence that all their gritty victories in the intervening years could provide for them, another person will be needed to continue to remind them of their competence.

The impact of illiteracy permeates the illiterate's present life in every aspect. Some come in the form of practical perplexities, frustrations, and anxiety about being "ripped off," shown up, made a fool of, and left helpless with no recourse.

LOU: *When I first started going out and meet people I had been to a place where I wanted to stop and I felt so tight and so worried about what was going to happen that I'd drive right by it and wouldn't stop, after driving fifteen or twenty miles to get there. Just wouldn't have the, uh, guts to stop. Afraid. Sometimes you just cannot face people. If you don't have the education that other people have you always, uh...well, you feel like gettin' back somewhere and hidin'.* (What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 7)

The homely tasks that "everybody" who can read takes for granted become sources of frustration and perpetuate the feeling that one cannot do what "everybody" else can do. At first, that was essentially reading, but then it multiplied exponentially to encompass all the little activities that reading enables other people to do.

> FREIDA: *I've never really read a book. Maybe someday I can. With recipes, I just look at them and I know what the words say. I wish sometimes I could understand them better. Like I had trouble canning this year. First time I've canned and I didn't understand it. But after awhile, I read it over and over, so I got it to come out right. Once in awhile, with recipes, I give up and get mad and put it to one side. Different things that I was trying to cook that didn't come out right, I'd throw them out. And I'd try them again. Mostly, I just remember how to cook things. But it would be nice to sit down and read a book.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 120-121)

Being illiterate as a parent "matters," as Ginny says. It affects family relationships and respect. The effects of their parents early failure to learn extends into the children's lifetime. This does not merely confine one's own life, but deprives the next generation of "something they should have."

> GINNY: *The only real problem it brings up is reading to the boys. I can't read to them, and, of course, that's leaving them out of something they should have. It bothers you if you can't read, and if you can't read to your boys, it bothers you more. Oh, it matters, you believe it matters. I ordered all these books. The kids belong to a book club, they got them that way. They know I can't read because it made me feel funny one day. Donny wanted me to read a book to him and Matthew, and I told Donny, I said, "I can't read." Well, he said, "Mommy, you sit down and I'll read it to you." Donny does fine on reading. I tried it one day reading from the pictures, and Donny looked at me and he said, " Mommy, that's not right." And he's only 5, so he knew I couldn't read from the pictures.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 60-61)

It would be nice to think that a person could keep his or her illiteracy in one corner of life. That there would be some aspects of that life unaffected by it. But it does not work out.

> ERNIE: *You know, it's funny, really. I've been married for 7 years. We got married in '68 and when I asked her to marry me...It's hard, you know, you find somebody you love and you try, you know you got this problem with reading, and you know that you're going to have to provide for her, and how do you go about telling somebody that you want to marry that you can't read? Right? Man, it's like opening a bottle, putting a stick of dynamite in it, and hoping it don't go off....Just the idear of telling somebody that I couldn't read. Hard to make it come out right. And then I found out she knew all about it.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 45-46)

In one form or another, all illiterates live with that stick of dynamite in the bottle. For many, the most painful risk of explosion is in trying to get and keep a job. The illiterate who has developed skills that compensate for his/her inability to read and write well still has to endure the anguish connected with applying for the job. Some have stopped trying.

LOU: *You find so many people who are out of work and don't go looking for a job. They seem to be able to work but never go. And everybody think, well, they're just lazy. They don't want to. They don't understand this fear that holds 'em back from being with the public, when they got a problem.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 14)

Others, like Ernie, are prepared to take their self-respect in their hands and sweat it out with the application.

ERNIE: *As far as reading, I think the biggest hassle if you can't read is not working. If you're not working and you got to go out and try to find a job, well, what I do is go down and get an application. "Can I make these out later and drop them back?" And if they say, "No, you have to make them out here," well, I say, "I have a problem reading and I can't make it out." He says, "You can't make the application out?" I say, "No." "Well," he says, "well, we aren't hiring right now," or "I don't have time to make out the application with you," or something like this. And that was the story most of the time. It's a real hassle just going into a place and trying, just knowing that you are going to have to make out an application, hoping you can go in someplace and take it out and bring it back.* (Cole, 1976, p. 46)

In many cases, the unwillingness of employers even to consider hiring anyone who does not read well (i.e., to help with the application in order to interview the applicant to determine whether (s)he has the skills needed for the job in question) seems related to the myth that those who cannot read well are probably incompetent in most other areas. In other cases, there will be reading and/or writing involved in a job that appears to require basically a manual skill, and the illiterate is left with the frustration of having a marketable skill rendered unmarketable because (s)he cannot handle the occasional need to deal with printed matter, requisition forms, supply catalogs, and the like.

GORDON: *I've lost a lot of jobs and I've been turned down for a lot of good jobs; jobs I could probably do as well as a college graduate, but I just didn't have the education. They're looking for education because for one reason, today, even if you're a janitor, there's still reading and writing involved. Like, if they leave a note saying, "Go to room so-and-so, this and that." You can't do it. You can't read it. You don't know. And they ain't going to hire somebody to run along and tell people what to do.* (Cole, 1976, p. 123)

Gordon acknowledges that he misses out on some jobs that require him to be minimally literate. Eva has been caught in the whole credential circus. She has applied for work for which she believes she has the minimal skills required, but potential employers look only at how much time she served in school as an indicator of her potential as a productive employee. They ignore the fact that had she spent whatever number of years would make her worthy in their sight (8? 12?) she might never have been given an opportunity to learn the manual skills they expect on the job. From a radio interview with a woman student, in her early 30's, from Burlington, Vermont:

INTERVIEWER: *So what do you do? Do you have a job besides just staying here?*

EVA: *No, I don't work. What I do, I work around the home and that's all now. I tried jobs and all they see is—well, how far did you go in school? Sixth grade, fifth grade. Well, we'll get back to you. Never do hear from them. I don't know what you have to have any grades for to work, but the hell with it.* ("Adult Illiteracy," 1979, p. 6)

"I don't know what you have to have any grades for to work," Eva declares. Indeed, at times it is difficult to perceive the relationship between the applicant's survival for a certain number of years of grade school and the skills actually required for a job being advertised. If there is no direct relationship, one may wonder whether the educational criterion is simply a convenient presorting device to narrow the field of applicants.

Illiterates rarely ask for special consideration; in fact, they tend, as Lou put it, to "feel like gettin' back somewhere and hidin'." But they want to be considered for employment on the basis of their strengths, the skills they have, their willingness to work hard, their own integrity. As the job market tightens, Ph.D.'s apply for custodian's jobs, dozens or hundreds of applicants turn out for a routine, low-paying job simply because it's a job, and employers fall back on screening by educational credentials. Eva and many others finally drop out of the army of job seekers and say, "the hell with it."

Getting a chance to prove you can do the job is one major hurdle for many illiterates. Keeping the job, competing with literate co-workers, is another.

GORDON: *You have to work harder. Say like we was both hired to work on a job, and say like you had a nice education, and they see you doing things around, and right off you'd picked it up because you could read it, and sombody over there can't read it. But he's probably working three times harder to try and stay up with you, you know what I mean, not to have them say, "Well, that guy there is no good and you're all right." You have to prove everything you do.* (Cole, 1976, p. 137)

ANGUS: *This is what was the difference between not knowing how to read and knowing how to read. I always put like that quite a bit extra into whatever I was doing. I always put extra effort into it because I figured, well, this guy beside of me, say he's got even a college degree. Like he was there for summer time help, and he walked around with his hands in his pockets, and didn't care. But to me, I had a family to support, and I had my future to look forward to.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 160-161)

"You have to prove everything you do," Gordon says. You have to swim upstream against the myth that if you cannot read you probably are not as competent a worker as the college kid hired for the summer. You have to face your own apprehension that your literate co-workers know something that is going on that you do not know, and they will be in the right place at the right time for a promotion or even simply to avoid a personnel cut.

Coping With Illiteracy

Coping with illiteracy is a fulltime occupation for millions of American adults. Whatever they are doing, whether struggling to decode a notice from the insurance company or convincing a mother-in-law that her beloved child will be supported in the manner to which she is accustomed, they must cope. Individual styles of coping are unique, and they are strongly affected by the degree to which the individual feels the need not simply to navigate through a perplexing situation but also to guard the secret of her/his illiteracy. Many people who accept the dummy assumption about illiterates would be stunned with admiration if they knew of the ingenious strategies devised by illiterates to cope with a literate world. But where the strategies are most successful, they are undetected and, since they cannot be appreciated, the public continues to assume that illiterates are dummies.

GINNY: *I think I missed something in life because I can't read. I don't hide it from people, though. I don't sign anything I can't read. If I can't read it, I get somebody to read it to me. If no one's here, I go to the girlfriend next door. It's no fun, either, going around pretending you can read because you're going to run up against something that you're going to have to sign and you might sign something that you don't want to sign. And you don't know what you're signing, so they serve you up with a paper. Well, I won't be made a fool of. Oh, I can be fooled and I can be used one time, and they don't use me the second time. You better believe it....If you're not going to admit that you can't do something, you're not going to get help, and you're not going to be able to do it. That's the way I feel about it.* (Cole, 1976, p. 61)

Mr. X is asked by the radio interviewer:

INTERVIEWER: *Do you have a fear when you come up against something that you must read? Do you feel a sudden rush of anxiety or fear?*

MR. X: *Oh, definitely....People would come up to me and say, "Make a right at the Pepsi sign." I wouldn't even see the Pepsi sign. I would just refuse to see the word. It wasn't till after I'd started to learn how to read that I would at least see the sign and recognize the colors, but there was a time when I would even refuse to see the sign, because I knew if I saw it, then I'd have to read it. Then there's always the excuse, you know, here, you read it, I don't have my glasses, I just woke up, that type of thing.*

Like I said before, I was married. I have two kids. What do I do if one of my kids starts choking and I go running to the phone? Nine times out of ten, I can't look up the phone number of the hospital. That's if we're at home. Like if we're out on the street, nine times out of ten I can't read the street. If I should get to a pay phone, and they say, ok, tell us where you are, we'll send an ambulance. I look at the street sign. Right there, I couldn't tell you what the name was, I'd have to spell it letter for letter. By that time, one of my kids could be dead. These are the kinds of fears you go with every single day of your life, and you can't tell anybody. (Curtis, 1979)

The fear that Lou mentioned earlier is there for many illiterates who cannot afford the risk of letting others know about their difficulty with reading and writing. Others, like Ginny, have decided for themselves that they cannot, will not, bluff their way through perplexities like papers to sign. These are two possible responses to the need to cope, but the coping goes on and on.

> LOU: *She (wife) used to ride along if I'd want to hunt up a strange place. She would be guiding me. She'd read the signs before I got there. Well, this is where we want to go. She'd say, "Turn here," you'd turn here. Took her word for it. Didn't really pay much attention to the signs 'cause I couldn't...didn't know what it meant if I could read it.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 8)

Making it when no one in the household is functionally literate:

> BUCK: *I met my wife when I was doing my nurse's training....She doesn't read and write that well either. I knew this before we was married, that she couldn't read and write that well. She can read a little better than what I can, but it's hard for her to make out different words and things. All of our mail we get, it's hard for her to read. Settin' down and writing a letter, she can't do it. There's just certain things that she could read out of books, but not that much. Like if we get a bill or somethin', she scrambles through it and then we take it over to my sister-in-law, and my sister-in-law reads it.* (Cole, 1976, p. 235)

Dennis, from Vermont, and Mr. X, living in Syracuse all his life, have worked out similar ways to cope with menus in restaurants, a potential scene of some embarrassment.

> DENNIS: *When I go out to eat at a restaurant I look at the menu and pretend to read it. If someone says, "What do you want?" I say, "Oh, go ahead, you order first, I haven't decided yet." And if he says, "I'll have a roast beef sandwich," I'll say, "Me, too."* (Cole, 1976, p. 146)

> MR. X: *The menu. I'm glad you brought that one up. You know what it's like...okay, imagine, if you will: you're taking a girl out to the restaurant. You sit down, and they throw the menu in front of you. Where do you go from there if you can't read the menu? Nine times out of ten you say, "Go ahead, here, pick out something for the both of us." I've eaten some weird things, let me tell you! If you're double-dating, if there's other people, that enhances the problem even more. What you do is, you're the first one to open up the menu, because I can read it if given enough time. By the time they get to dessert, I'm ready to order!* (Curtis, 1979)

The fine line between coping and con games is academic. As Lou says, you work hard to avoid awkward situations, and when you get into one anyway, you do what you need to in order to cope.

> LOU: *You have to be careful not to get into situations where it would leak out or be with people that would...ah, make it show. You always try to act intelligent, act like you knew about everything even if you did or not, you know. If somebody give you something to read, you make believe you read it and you must make out like you*

knew everything that was on there and try to get by with it, and most of the time you could. It's kinda like show biz...but it's...much nicer to know what everybody else knows. ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 1)

Urban Mr. X, asked how he manages, copes in a fashion surprisingly similar to Lou's in the farm country of Vermont: avoid a compromising situation if possible, and if not, make it up as you go along. Lou calls it "kinda like show biz." Mr. X says, "I dazzle him with my footwork." In the end, you distract someone from what you cannot do by going with what you can. For people with less confidence in themselves and in what they can offer other than literacy skills, the "dazzle" does not come off very much.

INTERVIEWER: *Now what happened when you got out in the world and you were going for a job, and you had to fill out an application, or mail comes into the office, or whatever—you may have to read instructions along the line. How do you cover up those problems?*

MR. X: *That's when you get into trouble. Reading directions, I suffer with. Now, I work with chemicals, which is scary to begin with. The moment a new chemical or a new product comes in, I take the material home and spend an hour to an hour and a half to read it, where somebody else could read it in 5 minutes. I can read it, it just takes me a long time, and by the time I'm done, I'm exhausted. Now when it comes time to filling out forms, when I meet who may become my new boss, I fall into an old trap. I dazzle him with my footwork, I guess you might say. I talk well. I look well. I dress well. I come on extremely confident, even though I'm shaking in my boots, and they're confused, they don't realize it, and by the time I razzle-dazzle them, I just take the form and say, "Hey, I'll take the form and bring it back tomorrow." That's usually how it works. However, if I wanted to change occupations, to get into another line of work, I can't. I'm in a line of work that doesn't call for much reading at all. There's no way that I can get into other lines that I'd like to get into because my reading does get mixed up, and that I can't write, and that I can't fill out forms and so on and so forth.* (Curtis, 1979)

One of the more hidden methods of coping with illiteracy, as Lou and Mr. X's strategies imply, is compensation—refusing to base all of their self-esteem where many others seem to and holding on to what they know they *can* do. Most of the people who can do this are getting some kind of affirmation that allows them to refuse to define themselves by what they *cannot* do—affirmation from family, friends, co-workers, or diverse members of the community. Without such affirmation it appears to us to be very difficult for individuals to get free of the negative self-image that plagues illiterates in this society. Dennis refuses to accept the stereotype that illiterates are verbally incompetent by sustaining a fascination with words as he *hears* them.

DENNIS: *I don't tell people I can't read. Most people figure I can. The teachers said I had a good vocabulary when I was in school. Say a word, I know what it means, I could tell them what it meant. I listened to the teacher well, too. I can listen. I learn things just by sitting here and talking and listening to other people talk. My father, I used to fool around with him and his friends, my mother and her friends, and listen*

to them talk. Even if it was just women talk, I still heard it. And I learn a lot from the TV. (Cole, 1976, pp. 144-145)

Whether any of Phil's assertions are bravado, immunizing him from dealing with some aspects of his illiteracy, only he knows, but his statement does demonstrate that he is aware and proud of what he can do, literacy aside.

PHIL: *It don't bother me any. I know a few that don't like anybody to mention it, that they can't read and write, but it don't bother me. It's just one of them things. Oh, I know a lot of people don't feel that way. Mention it around them and they just don't talk about it, but it don't bother me. But they can't buffalo me or fool me on anything. As far as doing any kind of work, I can do any kind of work that anybody can. I'm far enough ahead on stuff, outside of reading, it's quite a job for anyone to trick me on anything. There ain't a piece of equipment yet that I can't run, or I can't tear down and put back together.* (Cole, 1976, p. 66)

The whole matter of how people relate their incompetence in the area of literacy to the successes and failures they experience in all the other aspects of life has a profound effect on their ability to overcome the great "I CAN'T" that surrounds the possibility of becoming literate. Identifying and supporting those compensating factors is a major task for anyone hoping to help an illiterate make that change.

Realities of Literacy

We have spoken of the myths and realities of literacy and illiteracy, and of coping and the frustration of being unable to cope. We have spoken of literacy and illiteracy almost as if they were monolithic, identifiable entities. The move from one to the other is a complex constellation of tasks, rather than a single task. In moving from illiteracy to literacy, you would know when you got there. Is it true? How literate is literate, and if one attains that blessed state, what can one expect to change in one's life?

The myths are pervasive and dangerous. They limit our capacity to see all the possibilities and tempt us to generalize. For these reasons we must resist them, even at the expense of clever formulas and prescriptions. Literacy seems to be less a destination than a process. It is a way of seeing and thinking supported by skills and affected by the learning and social experiences and the self-esteem of the one seeking to attain it. You know when you "get there" not because someone awards you a diploma or informs you that you are a 6.5. You know because it is actually possible to write down a telephone message that is understood by its recipient in your absence, read the classified ads and call the phone number and buy the car, or locate and follow a recipe for zucchini bread when your refrigerator is full of squash.

For the moment, let us use the phrase "becoming more literate," rather than "becoming literate," as the former suggests process and the relative nature of literacy acquisition. What then can and cannot be changed by becoming more literate? For one who is considered illiterate, becoming an "educated" person may come to represent a beatific state of infinite power, economic prosperity, relational bliss, and a chance to tell the whole world from one's fourth-grade teacher to the snooty food-stamp clerk, "I TOLD YOU SO." In short...the other

end of the rainbow. Since one never gets quite to the end of rainbows, where can one get by becoming more literate?

As Dennis discovered, it was real change for him to be able to "fill out an application for a job without help sometimes," to look in the TV Guide for programs he wanted to see, to get his driver's license. Each of these new capacities enabled him to control some area of his life. Being able to fill out the job application "sometimes" did not guarantee that he would get the job, but he never expected that; he just wanted to be fairly considered on his own actual merits. Lem says on behalf of so many people, "It sure ain't fun to be lost." Being able to read road signs and maps will not be a panacea for all the problems in a person's life, but it can be a visible sign of being/feeling less lost and less perplexed in situations where everyone else knows what is going on.

If Freida could read the canning instructions or the recipe, it still would not help her figure out how to survive when basic expenses exceed income by 20 percent, but it would give her a sense that she can do something with what she has and can choose among several things. If Ginny could read to her boys, it would not make them tidier, more obedient, or less sassy, but it would give her a sense that she is not failing to provide "something they should have." She is in her proper role as parent, rather than having her 5-year-old say, "Mommy, you sit down and I'll read it to you."

For some people, the vast changes they hope to accomplish by becoming more literate may be daydreams—an "if-only" beyond their grasp. But for others like Lou, one small change makes it possible to step up to another, and a losing pattern can be turned around.

> LOU: *All my life of farming I have never had to pay any income tax or never paid any Social Security. I never made enough money. And this year I'm making up for lost time. So that should say something. So, you might say that tutor has helped put me from being a non-taxpayer to being a taxpayer. If that doesn't pay back his wages that he's gettin' I don't know what can pay.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 14)

To quote Lou is not to suggest that the only "successes" are the sagas of major life changes. Nor does "Number of Students Who Gained Employment" measure success, much as the dispensers of funds and tabulators of "success" would like to think. For Ernie, to propose marriage without "opening a bottle, putting a stick of dynamite in it" would be success with a capital S, but what column of the Federal ABE statistical report will that go in? For Ginny, to be able to read the paper she must sign, consider it, and sign it would be success, but she may well appear among the failures in the national statistics because at the same time she dropped out of a tutoring program to have her fourth child. For Mr. X, to be able to scan a menu, select something he wants to eat, and order it would be a success, but there will be no celebration in Washington because he "entered program" at 4 to 6 grade level and is still there.

Perhaps what becoming more literate *can* do is give a person the opportunity to make more choices, rather than waiting in anxiety for someone else's decisions. This does not mean the person will accept the responsibility for making those choices and decisions, or that (s)he will make the "right" ones, or that life will be simple, secure, and happy, but that there are new possibilities.

2. MAKING THE DECISION TO BECOME LITERATE

For an adult, the process of *deciding* to become literate is complex. It seems at its most basic to consist of acknowledging facts about present circumstances and being able to face and deal with the prospect of major change in those circumstances. J. R. Kidd, of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has observed about the learning process:

> What do we know about learning? In some ways it is like electricity....Like electricity, we do know something about how learning happens, under what conditions it flows and moves; we can use its power. We do know that learning means change; that learning is active, not passive. The learner opens up himself, he stretches himself, he reaches out, he incorporates new experience, he expresses or unfolds what is latent within him. The critical part of the process is how the learner is aided to embark in this active, growing, changing, painful or exhilarating experience we call learning. (Kidd, 1976, p. 5)

Change

Kidd is speaking of adult learning in general. For many adult illiterates, while Kidd's observations are valid, the dynamic, exciting aspects of learning as a change agent in one's life are all but obscured by the threatening aspects of change itself. The illiterate has all too often been caricatured as one who is blind. As we have seen, many illiterates are able to compensate for this alleged blindness. Yet there is also a sense in which, like the blind, illiterates must enter new situations without access to the information that other people have and take as a matter of course. For such information as they do have, they are frequently dependent on other people, who may or may not provide them with the data they need to respond appropriately and make decisions. It is no wonder that the prospect of change, which is frightening for everyone and has devastating effects on some, is not easy for many illiterates to face or deal with.

Becoming literate is a change that will affect virtually all aspects of a person's life, as well as a wide circle of other people associated with her/him. One's self-image is bound to be affected by so fundamental a shift from being a person who is *un*able to one who is *able*. This may mean taking more responsibility for one's life, decisions, and livelihood than a person has ever had to take. It may be uncomfortable to be constantly dependent on other people, as illiterates often are keenly aware of being, but there are some hidden and not-so-hidden benefits to such helplessness. If it is taken away as a person becomes increasingly competent, the discomfort of dealing with new expectations (one's own and others') can be a shock.

Relationships will change. For example, the wife in Vermont ABE's film *What If You Couldn't Read?*, who has felt useful for 15 or 20 years as the one who dealt with all written records for the family, wonders if she is still needed now that her husband has become literate. All the ways of coping and conning that a person may have developed over one or two decades must change. Sources of affirmation change. One Vermont learner who has gotten many of his strokes as an adult from doing the simple tasks that others do and from having people exclaim, "You did that and you couldn't read?!" has hit a "plateau" in learning to read, short of empowerment, that he may never be willing to leave.

Adult illiterates are not always able or willing to articulate the kinds of changes they guess or foresee will occur if they undertake to become literate, and they avoid many opportunities to overcome what many of them consider the greatest impediment to their general advancement and economic well-being. This suggests that there must be some strong resistance to making that decision.

There are various possible responses to the perceived need for change that an illiterate may feel. While a widely shared stereotype would have resistance to change increase with age, Kidd asserts that "with aging there is sometimes resistance to change. But not always. It seems to be more a function of one's personality and one's expectations and aspirations than of birthdays" (Kidd, 1976, p. 8). Those "expectations and aspirations" are the catch.

For persons with scant evidence that any expenditure of effort on their part will affect the complex of problems in their lives, the expectation of failure may be nearly insurmountable. David Boggs, in an article on behaving-valuing patterns of low-status people, quotes Lee Rainwater (1968):

> Individuals in a group negotiate with significant others to be allowed to play the normative game—to get into the game and to have the resources that will allow them to play it. If the individual is not allowed in the game, or if he cannot get the resources to play the game successfully and thus experience constant failure at it, he is not "conceptual boob" enough to continue knocking his head against a stone wall—he withdraws from the game. (Boggs, 1974, p. 299)

One common response to an invitation to play the "game" of upward mobility by getting more educational "resources" is: "Forget it." Some illiterates sense that it is possible, but retreat from the risks involved; many others genuinely do not believe that anything they do can make a substantial difference in their lives.

For some people in the latter group, the person who can convince them to try to become literate, if anyone can, is the person who once stood in their shoes:

> LOU: *I had a fellow in here a little while ago and he was trying to make me out a check. It was all signed in my name, made out in my name and everything and all he got to do is write in the figures. And he was kind of gruff and all. And I knew from the way he was acting what was going through his mind, 'cause I been through it so many times myself. When that guy is squirming like he wanted to fall through the cement you know that feeling. So I offered to do it and so he handed it right over quick. And when I wrote it out, I says, "Don't feel alone. I used to be just like that*

and not too long ago either." And I told him, "You don't have to be like that."
("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, pp. 13-14)

"You don't have to be like that." Someone who has taken the risks and made the transition can say this as no literacy program staff ever can (unless, of course, they have also come the same route). So among the responses to the perceived need for change not only are resistance and denial possible, but with some catalyst (see chapter 3), so is the decision to "go for it."

Constraining Forces

What are some of the constraining forces concerning an adult illiterate's decision to "go for it," to risk the effort to try to become literate?

For a high percentage of illiterates, the awareness of past failures and the fear of repeating them has to be at the top of the list. The reasons they articulate are sometimes disguised as pragmatic statements rather than emotional ones: "I'm too busy," "I'm too old," "Schoolin's for youngsters."

Behind these protests are years of painful recollections of failure, not only in school but later. The voices of teachers, relatives, derisive peers, and co-workers are replayed whenever the person considers making a new effort to become literate. One Vermont learner, a man in his 50's, worked weekly with his volunteer tutor for over 2 years and progressed from a scant grasp of phonics to relatively fluent reading. Even so, he would suddenly founder on a word he could technically handle, would become tongue-tied. One day, when his tutor encouraged him to try a word that had paralyzed him, he said: "You know, I know I can do it too. But every so often I get to a word and this voice in back of my head says, 'You're a dummy, you'll never learn to read,' and I go blank." This student quoted that "tape" four or five times in 2 hours, verbatim.

The original schooling experience is not the only deterrent for adults. Some have tried adult education programs and found themselves back in the old embarrassments of the competition that occurs in learning groups. They also faced material geared to the group as a whole but to no one in particular—a compromise among interests if these were determined at all. Or worse, the material was not even geared to the group but selected for other criteria than interest. Books were peopled by pastel-shaded adults who declare, "I am a happy man," and similar easy-to-read sentences unthought and unspoken by the student in her/his life.

Related to the fear of repeated failure is the apprehension of illiterates that they really *are* incapable of learning what "everyone" else has learned. If they publicly undertake to learn to read and write, this will be demonstrated once and for all. If they avoid that effort, they may remain in their unsatisfying circumstances; but that modicum of esteem-sustaining doubt remains that if they did try, they *could* succeed.

The illiterate is not the only one, of course, who makes the decision to become literate difficult or impossible. Other people—family, friends, employer, social services agency personnel—can contribute. The most obvious for Vermont ABE's home tutors, who see students in their own milieu, are the members of the immediate family who deride the learner and seem to

lurk around the house, trailer, or apartment waiting to pounce on every error that the learning reader makes. This behavior can be the overt aspect of a complex family situation in which it is in someone's vested interest to keep a person illiterate. Often this is related to relational insecurity as to whether, if the illiterate no longer depends on a spouse or parents, (s)he will choose to remain related to the person(s). For many people, these anxieties are very difficult to identify and articulate following years of family situations based on a set pattern of dependency.

Conversely, close associates of the illiterate can, ironically, discourage the decision to become literate by too much encouragement. The line between encouragement and pressure is too fine and too fluid to be defined, but it is crucial. The point at which a wife's support becomes nagging or an employer's awareness of and sympathy with an employee's need for further education becomes an ultimatum can be determined only by the illiterate's own feelings. Many illiterates, sensitive about their lack of education, may be hasty to view the best-intentioned urging as "pressure." If they so perceive it, they will respond to it as pressure and not as encouragement.

Another deterrent for many illiterates is their lack of any identifiable experience that creates the expectation of success in learning, or even, as Lee Rainwater suggests, of success in learning leading to tangible benefits in their lives. Kidd observes that, for a person to engage satisfactorily in an activity in middle or late life, it is helpful if (s)he "had some experience of these activities, with satisfaction," before (s)he was 25 (Kidd, 1976, p. 8). Obviously, for many adults facing a decision to try again to become literate, "satisfaction" did *not* characterize their early experience of such learning; somehow this early experience of failure must be dealt with.

Compounding this problem is the tendency of the majority of illiterate adults to equate the kind of learning they envision doing if they decide to try to become literate with school. For many, school was not a positive experience. It is surely safe to state that every one of them has successfully learned many skills and acquired much essential information, but in basically nonacademic styles, simply to survive, to be parents, wage-earners, consumers. They do not associate these kinds of learning with "education," and as a result, their success in these areas does not affirm a more positive expectation. Unless someone else helps them to acknowledge their informal learning achievements, they will not see themselves as having been "learners" all along.

Another obstacle is the mental image that adults have of being back in that brick school building with the little desks, the chalk dust, and the mouth-dry anxiety of competition—an image that all too often is borne out in reality. Ernie describes his struggle to overcome the memory of school.

> ERNIE: *You know, for the longest time, since I got out of school, people would say, "Go back to school." I couldn't see myself. Okay. There I am, 19, 20, 21 going back to a school with people there. I couldn't see it. It's all I could think of, going back to the...lines for spelling bees and all this stuff. I couldn't hack it. But finally, I had to do something. I wasn't getting nowhere. I ain't getting nowhere now, but it's getting to be a little bit better.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 48-49)

From their experience with thousands of adult learners, Jonathan McKallip and Jinx Crouch of LVA feel that one of the most difficult things a student must do is bring her/himself to the point of saying, "I want some help" (McKallip and Crouch, 1979). It may take a person years to reach this point. Behind the difficulty, they feel, are two fears: getting back into the school experience, and the unknown.

For some who attach a lot of shame to their illiteracy (and not *all* illiterates do) and have invested a lot of energy in hiding it from others, the prospect of "turning themselves in" or making the actual move to get help can be too painful to undertake, even though they are keenly aware of their need for the help. Some direct and unforeseen contact with literacy program personnel may suddenly present them with an opportunity that they seize. This has happened in Vermont, when home tutors encounter neighbors and relatives in the homes of their students. The visitors, at ease in this environment and bolstered by a trust relationship established between the tutor and student, will request help. Or a home tutor who drove miles into the hills to work with a student, only to find no one home, may use the time to knock on a few doors and let people know about the tutoring opportunity. (S)he repeatedly discovers people who have known about the program for months or years and were always "just about to call"...but, one senses, never would have quite managed to do it.

This "turning oneself in" process is one area where the enthusiam of relatives and friends can be either helpful or counterproductive. Every literacy program gets calls from people who want their husband, daughter, father, son-in-law, neighbor to learn to read. The program staff has to determine whether the illiterate him/herself actually wants to and is ready to invest the effort in learning.

Another impediment to deciding to become literate is the potential student's perception that those purveying literacy education have an agenda of their own, related to but separate from the literacy itself. This may range from reading the Bible to promulgating the values of the dominant American culture. David Boggs notes:

> The values of the target population are fair game for both change agents and social science researchers alike, since their perseverance in aberrant form is seen as inimical to the improvement of the individual's position in the social order....It is not at all surprising that whether packaged in the form of admonitions by social workers or straight-from-the-shoulder man-to-man advice as in job readiness programs, or as coping skills in adult basic education, conventional middle class directives on how to dress, buy, bathe, talk, or act in any of their roles as parent, spouse, friend, employee, and citizen strike lower-class persons as singularly inappropriate, nay even insulting, given the perpetuation of existing societal forces and circumstances. (Boggs, 1974, p. 309)

Boggs' observation is challenging to administrators and staff of literacy programs. The kinds of agendas he suggests are those undertaken sincerely, with all good intentions to make available to the "losers" in society the ways and means of the dominant culture. Where these intentions are openly stated and correspond to those of the learner, fine. Where they are covert, they will, despite all the goodwill with which they are propounded, become "hoops" through which the student has to jump in order to gain the skills (s)he needs. Some people are willing to jump, others simply avoid the program. It is by no means easy to keep clearing the

"hoops" out of a program so that the students' own agendas are indeed dominant. Carman Hunter adds, from the perspective of counseling and community development:

> We know that the way you do it is by working beside people, and not doing something *to* or for them. But if you analyze the literature often, it's often: How do we do something *to* illiterates so that they will become literate?—rather than: How do we talk with people to discover what skills *they* want to develop and to help them discover the ways they can develop them? (Hunter, 1979)

The literature and our own experience amply demonstrate that adult illiteracy often is not an isolated problem in a person's otherwise happy life of personal, social, and economic success. Characteristically, it is part of a web of problems, some inherited from an older generation, some being passed on to the next. Daily life is a finger-in-the-dike operation at best, a zigzag from crisis to crisis: fending off eviction until the baby recovers from pneumonia; heating the trailer with the oven because the fuel company will not deliver again until the bill is paid; tinkering with the car's carburetor all night so one can get to work 20 miles away after the boss has said that one more late arrival is the end. These and a thousand other such binds are the normal fare of life. It is difficult to make the decision to put energy into literacy, a long, slow process with theoretical benefits. Carl English, former director of Vermont's ABE program, has written:

> Literacy is *not* the first priority for most poor, undereducated adults. They have other pressing immediate needs. If one is hungry, sick, or cold, learning to read or write is pretty low on the priority list. Reading, writing, and increased knowledge can produce long-range benefits, but these are hard to perceive when present problems are overwhelming. (Broschart, 1977, p. 32)

Finally, an enumeration of major factors inhibiting an adult's decision to become literate cannot reasonably omit the simple but potent fact that many people, either from previous experience or from intuition, realize that the process will involve a lot of hard work to which they are either unable or unwilling to commit themselves. They are sometimes lured into literacy programs whose PR messages stress the benefits and rewards of studying. They become the discouraged dropouts who had hoped that here at last, in our push-button culture, would be a push-button program that could do for them what school had failed to do. Their disappointment speaks of thousands of others, unseen, who know in advance that a large investment of energy and patience would be required over a period of months and probably years and simply could not deal with it. It is a rare program that advertises widely, "This will be tough, but come if you dare!" Despite the plans of politicians and the hopes of educators that every American adult will learn to read and write, it remains a fact that, having made a realistic assessment of their situation, their energy, the demands on their time, and the particular educational resources actually available to them, the decision not to try is the right one for some.

Facilitating Factors

Given a sobering list of impediments to the decision of an adult to become literate, what factors facilitate the decision?

At the top of the list has to be a constellation of reasons broadly categorized as motivation. It may be positive—a clear sense of wanting to do or be something that until now has been impossible—or negative—the painfully keen awareness of all the experiences when being illiterate led to severe loss of esteem, either from oneself or others, and often long-term social and/or economic consequences. No illiterate adult needs anyone else to list reasons why being able to read and write would be better; each can list a hundred reasons from her/his life without pausing for breath. It is in this that they have, as learners, a distinct advantage over children, who have not lived long enough to experience the onslaught of the printed word in a literate society and who often grumble, "Why do we have to learn this dumb stuff?" A Vermont student senses the importance of motivation.

> GINNY: *I was thinking about going back to school. I've talked to Carol (her ex-tutor) about it. I'd like to learn how to drive and get my license....But you've got to want to go if you're going to go. There's no sense in going up there and setting there and not wanting to go, because if you don't want to go there's no sense in going because it ain't going to do you no good at all.* (Cole, 1976, p. 62)

Motivation for many adult illiterates is related to a new awareness that the effort invested in learning will be *directly* applicable to problem-solving in everyday life. Evidence suggests that the visible payoff—and that not too distant—is of tremendous importance in adults' decisions to begin and to sustain learning activities. Promises of remote rewards are simply insufficient for many; too many other demands are crowding in on their time, energy, and attention.

A recent survey of 219 students in Literacy Volunteers of America's tutoring program bears out the many allegations that adults bring themselves to put energy into learning when they can see definite reasons and rewards, with a significant number employment related:

> Students entered the program for a variety of very practical reasons, the most common being a desire for a better job (selected by approximately 27% of the respondents). The single most popular student-reported benefit resulting from increased reading skills was the ability to read and write letters (23%), followed by the ability to help children in school (15%), and then by getting a job or promotion (14%). (Ullagaddi, 1978, pp. 18-19)

Phil, a 31-year-old literacy student, relates his own motivation to the employment area, where his impatience with getting jobs incommensurate with his skills propelled him to seek help in reading.

> PHIL: *If I could read and write I probably could be a lot further up on stuff. If I could read and write right now I know where I could get a mechanic job that pays the top price. That's one thing about reading and writing. A lot of people hold it against you and it's quite a job getting work on account of it.* (Cole, 1976, p. 84)

In another approach to the direct relevance of literacy skills to everyday problem-solving, Kathleen Kelly is engaged in an effort to transfer to the United States an idea that is working well in Latin America. Small groups are formed to solve problems in a community, whether that community is a village or a city block. When and if members of such groups feel that a lack of literacy skills is hampering them, literacy instruction is available by training someone chosen

by the group to be the enabler. Credit union groups in the United States, for example, might come to view applied literacy in this way. "When it's focused on problem-solving on an adult level," she says, "we don't have to treat it as something unadult. We all do this" (Laubach and Kelly, 1979).

Often, given all the "constraining forces," some kind of crisis is required to precipitate the decision to seek help with literacy. Jinx Crouch of LVA speaks of students' decisions to become literate in these terms (McKallip and Crouch, 1979): They go along until they feel threatened, and that often comes in either the job situation or parenting. "We've had cases where there's been a crutch, like a wife will help a husband through the job assignments; and when there's a threat that that crutch is going to be removed for some reason, they go into a panic and seek help, even though it's worked for quite awhile." Jinx compares the crisis with that of alcoholics with whom she has worked: "When you hit a bottom that's your own bottom—it doesn't have to be destitution—within yourself you've reached a point that is crisis, people seem willing to come" (McKallip and Crouch, 1979). A more positive form of crisis is an opportunity for which facility with written language is necessary. These tend to be employment opportunities, especially advancement into supervisory positions, but may also be something as personal as an approaching marriage.

During what may be a long period of reaching a decision, some illiterate or semiliterate adults try to teach themselves to somehow absorb the words by osmosis. But it does not work. Bessie, a widow in her early 30's with children, living in Burlington, Vermont, talks about her experience and about how she feels about the change since she has been getting help from ABE.

> BESSIE: *Oh, I spent many hours when I was working out to different places going out to a library and getting books, you know. little books that maybe have just one word on a page. And I would go to my room and I would spend many hours trying to figure out that word and most generally end up crying myself to sleep over it. You know, just trying to figure the words out. But at times I do pretty good, and then when it gets a little bit too much, I just couldn't do it by myself any more. Now I can get out in the crowd and feel just about—with them it's just about the same level as I am. And I can use words now that I couldn't before, and boy, it makes you feel pretty good, I know, to be able to do that.* ("Adult Illiteracy," 1979, p. 8)

Phil, too, tried to learn by himself, by sheer willpower.

> PHIL: *I tried and tried to read quite often in the past. But I'd set down and pick up a book, and, like, the small words I could get. But you get a word that's three or more letters, or more, into it and I was right against a brick wall.* (Cole, 1976, p. 84)

Having tried to accomplish this learning by themselves and having suffered the frustrations of which Bessie and Phil speak, some people do arrive at a new awareness that: (1) the process will require help; (2) if they are lucky, such help is available; and (3) if they are really fortunate, the help is available in ways that are much more comfortable than their previous experiences or fantasies, i.e., it is offered in a familiar setting such as but not confined to the home. One-to-one instruction that protects confidentiality and avoids competition with other

learners is offered. The teaching centers on the student's own goals and interests and proceeds at a pace that makes sense in terms of the realities of the rest of a person's life.

In this connection, Vermont ABE's home-tutoring program has built in an acknowledgment of the other, more immediate pressures felt by adult learners. Students are consistently assured of hassle-free re-access to tutoring as soon as maple sugaring season is over (a good 6 weeks of work for many hard-core unemployed in Vermont), the water is out of the basement, the kids have recovered from mumps, and the like. To back this up, home tutors try to stop by when they are in the area to see a student who has had to stop studying to deal with some immediate need or crisis. If the student is not yet ready to resume studying, (s)he at least gets the feeling that the tutor still cares. If (s)he is ready but had been shy about re-enrolling, the problem is solved.

As with the impediments to deciding to become literate, so with the enabling factors; other persons in the illiterate's environment can be extremely influential. Dr. Robert Laubach likes to say that it takes a person to bring a person (Laubach and Kelly, 1979). Someone reaches out, and the decision seems simpler, feels supported. An example from Vermont illustrates this in a way that makes the decision look rather casual; in fact, one suspects that the "bringing person" was the final element in a fairly complex decision to try again.

> ANGUS: *I started going to my tutor the year I hurt my back, so it's been just about two years now. It was when I worked for _____ Lumber Company....What I got into was one day one of the guys that works in the office come out and asked me if I wanted to be a student and learn how to read. And I says, "Sure," so he told me where to go.* (Cole, 1976, p. 154)

The direct involvement of another person in the decision, however, always raises the possibility of coercion. Whether intended or not, there is a subtle line between encouragement and pressure. Literacy Volunteers' experience corroborates that of the Vermont ABE program: the degree of success for learners who are enrolled under duress, real or imagined (e.g., as a condition of probation or of participation in a work-training program), is much smaller than for those who have taken the initiative and made a free decision. "Pressure" by employers or by agency personnel is often unintended. When people with power over someone's job or more general condition "suggest" that the person study, it is difficult to hear the suggestion as anything other than a command or a condition that must be met to be acceptable.

Jinx Crouch of LVA does say, "I think intervention can help, like if an employer says, hey, you would go further if you would sharpen up your skills, and this is available for you. I think a little push doesn't hurt a lot of people, so long as it's a *little* push!—not where it's a 'must' " (McKallip and Crouch, 1979). The gentle push may help the person take the plunge and get into the learning situation. Then it is up to the learner and the tutor or other helpers to stay closely connected to the learner's own agenda so that, even if (s)he originally came at someone else's instigation, the energy soon becomes hers/his.

Even after we make all our observations and see some patterns, J. R. Kidd asserts that we still do not really understand the whole matter of adult motivation for learning:

> I must point out that we are still rather ignorant about the learning of adults. We don't know nearly enough. We aren't sure why it is that some people will put themselves out, will extend themselves and their powers, will try, will take risks. We know that others are resistant, are wary, are slow to start and quick to give up. We give the latter names—they are apathetic, or lazy, or not well-motivated. But we are better at name-calling than we are at understanding or helping such people become effective learners. (Kidd, 1976, p. 5)

Given all the factors discussed above, we believe that at a given moment a very small percentage of the famous "target population" of adult illiterates is prepared to make the kind of changes that becoming literate requires. Many who are not committed to this real change are nevertheless enrolled in literacy programs. Many will improve their reading skills and may even be reclassified from beginner to intermediate on the annual report of the program. They do not, however, persevere to the point where the profound changes alluded to in the first part of this chapter must be dealt with.

In view of this, it would seem that, in place of programs with target populations derived from census figures, there should be mechanisms designed to respond to and serve those whose moment for change has come; to encourage those who are on the brink of theirs; and to provide instruction in reading and writing skills as requested by others. These would not concern "targets," which imply a programmatic purpose directed at faceless statistics who are deficient in something that someone else has declared they need. What might (and might not) characterize such a response mechanism is spelled out more particularly in chapters 3 and 4.

3. THE PROCESS OF BECOMING LITERATE

Unlearning and Relearning

An adult who undertakes to become literate, whatever his or her recollections of childhood learning efforts, is beginning a process that is more complicated and more difficult than earlier learning was. J. R. Kidd observes:

> One of the major differences between a child learning and an adult learning lies in the blocks or assemblies of experience possessed by the adult. For the child, each new concept must usually be built from scratch. The achievement of adult understanding takes place slowly as one's knowledge is gradually integrated with the knowledge already acquired. To put it another way, the adult must unlearn or modify what he knows and this is often the hardest part. (Kidd, 1976, p. 16)

Perhaps the most crucial part of this statement seems to be the *un*learning and modifying. That is what takes so long, and it often accounts for adult learners becoming very impatient with themselves. They often assume that since they have lived years longer than their kids, they should be able to learn that much faster. In some ways, this is true. Much of their learning literacy skills is a process of recognition, of making connections to what they already know, verbally or visually, of the "Aha!" moment, which children with their limited experience cannot do. But in all those years of experience, illiterate adults have also made end-runs around some of the patterns of literacy, and become cemented into some of those patterns. Now that must be torn down and rebuilt.

The unlearning seems to be basically of two kinds: cognitive and affective. The former has to do with the various ways illiterate or semiliterate adults have learned to deal with written symbols and the kinds of changes that need to be made in their habitual approaches to printed matter. The examples of adult students quoted in chapter 1 are by no means exhaustive, but they give an indication of the range of illiterate adults' responses to written matter: pretend you can read it and hope you do not get caught; try to make it out without help, then take it to someone you trust and have them read it; when faced with printed matter in a public situation, admit that you cannot read it and try to get help; read the words you know and get the idea, and, if that does not work, sit down again with the instructions and read them again and again until you think you have made more sense of them; recognize that you can read some words but confuse the meaning they make together, so that it is risky to depend too much on what you have read (e.g., dealing with dangerous chemicals); refuse to see printed words so you will not have to read them.

Many adults can articulate some of the coping mechanisms they have developed, but others cannot, even to themselves. Whether recognized and expressed, these devices become learned responses that function below the level of conscious choice in a given situation. This makes it especially difficult for a person to decide to change.

It took Mr. X some time after he had begun studying to realize that his mind "refused" to see words and to force it to begin seeing them, even though he now had some skills for decoding them. One way of responding to printed words that tutors encounter often in adult students is to say aloud each letter in the word, hoping to recognize the word if they can recognize its building blocks. Sometimes it actually appears to "work," perhaps in part because the reader has stalled for a good deal more time to examine the word. It is devastating for them to go beyond decoding to the derivation of meaning from a sentence or paragraph.

In brief, as adults begin to acquire literacy skills for decoding words—and for re-encoding them, in writing—those skills may not be applied immediately and simply to any written material; at an almost autonomic level, the responses to print that they have built up over years form a barrier to the new possibilities. The learner has first to become conscious to some degree of how (s)he has habitually dealt with written words and to make intentional efforts to change those patterns. This may involve a disciplined refusal to guess at words, if bluffing and guessing were the old way. Conversely, if a rigid compulsion to sound out every letter of every word had impeded real reading, they may have to do *more* guessing, assessing the context and the phonetic clues in the hard words and trying out some possible meanings.

Most home tutors would say without hesitation that of the two areas of unlearning, the affective is by far the greater challenge both to the learner and to anyone helping him/her. The "I can't" and the "I'm too dumb to learn" run so deep that they dominate the learning expectations. Each tiny failure, which might be taken in stride by a person with some confidence in her/his ability to learn, is seen as dramatic confirmation of the incompetence that people have attributed to the learner for a lifetime. The lack of confidence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy until the tide of expectation can somehow be changed toward success rather than failure.

"Nothing succeeds like success" was never truer than for an adult learning to read and write. The single most important task of the learner her/himself and of anyone helping with the learning is not mastering the sound of m or the 200 most common sight-words in the English language, but rather gradually building a new self-image and expectation. When this happens, all the other kinds of progress become possible. Until then, the person may acquire various decoding and encoding skills, but not the ability to read with sufficient fluency, comprehension, and confidence that they can act on the basis of what has been read.

The age of adult learners has some bearing on the matter of unlearning, but not so much as one might think. Students in their 40's, 50's, and older have added baggage in the affective area because they have to get past all the ways they have justified for not making a new effort to learn. They may well have given up on themselves in some important ways. They may not only have children but grandchildren who can read, so that their feelings about the risk of trying and failing are increased by the possible loss of esteem in the family. But as far as being *able* to learn, if they can convince themselves of the possibility, every evidence shows that there is no impediment for them. Contrary to folk wisdom of "you can't teach an old dog new tricks,"

J. R. Kidd reminds us that adult learning is not the anomaly it was once thought to be, but rather a natural function of human beings.

> In his book *Adult Learning*, Thorndike said bluntly more than forty years ago, "almost any adult can learn almost anything he needs to learn," and no evidence has since been uncovered to dispute this conclusion. Before Thorndike, it was commonly believed that optimum years for learning anything were eighteen to twenty-two. His research caused him to put the date "of no return" at about forty-five years. Evidence is now convincing that no serious decline in learning capacity need occur before 75, and if good health remains, to some later date. Respecting adult learning, chronological age is not a particularly important factor. (Kidd, 1976, pp. 7-8).

The conclusion we can draw is that adults *can* learn; they just need the right context in which to do it. As Kidd puts it, "Human beings seem to seek after learning; learning seems to be a condition of a healthy organism. The main task is to provide the climate and atmosphere and freedom and stimulus and self-confidence and self-discipline in which learning is promoted" (Kidd, 1976, pp. 5-6).

What Is Learned?

What is actually learned in order to become literate? There are splendid lists of technical tasks that must be mastered (visual discrimination, auditory discrimination, rhyming, cognitive organizing, alphabet, sound-symbol association) and of applied skills that adults in America are alleged to need to survive (such as the recent and widely popular findings of the University of Texas' Adult Performance Level). But there is virtually no adult who can do *none* of the tasks on such lists.

A child can build skills in an admirable logical sequence. An adult may know the name of one letter but not of another, the sound of this diphthong but not that; (s)he may recognize Skaneateles at sight if (s)he lives there or has close relatives there, but mixes up *not* and *on* and *no*. An adult can write some printed and cursive letters (especially if they occur in her/his signature) and some lower-case and some upper-case letters. In other words, becoming literate, as far as skills go, is a matter of filling in gaps. Where the gaps actually are is the first puzzle. The only rule that can be made about them is that their occurrence is unpredictable because they result from the inexpressible construct of one individual's life-experience: each has a "reason" in terms of that experience, but it is more profitable for the learner to invest his/her energy in discovering and filling the gaps than in explaining or predicting them.

This discovery happens in the course of trying to use printed symbols for a particular purpose chosen by the learner, whenever (s)he gets "stuck" on something. A tutor soon learns to catalog such "stuck" places and to determine whether a word of encouragement will free up the snag or whether the student has really drawn a total blank. Tutors in Vermont's ABE program do not try to locate a student on a theoretical continuum of skills and advance that person step by step thereafter. Rather, the student identifies something (s)he wants to learn, and the student and tutor together identify and acquire materials needed to learn it; wherever the student gets stuck on the way to finding out what (s)he needs to know, the tutor helps with the missing skill. A new learning task will turn up new skills needs. There may yet be skills on

someone's list that the student "lacks," but if the placement of the apostrophe to form the plural possessive never comes up in actual learning situations, it will not be addressed and no work sheets on the subject will be given to the student.

What is learned by an adult becoming literate is also the connections of new skills and information with what is already known—with a fully developed oral language capacity and an adult's experience of life. Such synthesizing is difficult to include in a lesson plan, but it is absolutely essential if the new skills are not to remain skills in isolation and new information a detached collection of facts.

The catalyst in this synthesizing is the student's recognition that the skills (s)he is gaining are the very ones that connect with the problems (s)he has to solve. The digraphs worked on in yesterday's lesson turn up in the instructions on the fabric-dye box today; the sight-words on the cards with which (s)he played the game of Concentration with the tutor this morning occur in the notice in the mailbox this afternoon about the water being temporarily turned off. If only skills that are actually, immediately, and specifically needed are worked on, and if the learner can recognize new learnings, no matter how small, those mysterious connections—the synthesizing with past experience—get made most effectively.

Not only must the specific skills be worked on only as they are needed for acquiring information that the student wants, but the subject matter and material used in learning must be directly related to the problems, needs, questions, and aspirations of the student *today*. "A child," says Kidd, "expects to learn, more or less, what he (sic) is told to learn; the adult applies a rigorous test of relevancy" (Kidd, 1976, p. 7).

Vermont ABE tutors have found that, conditioned by their school experience where someone knew what it was good for you to learn, many adults, too, are eager to have an "expert" tell them what they "ought" to be learning. However, having tasted the excitement of finding out about something they really need or want to know about this week—looking up a number in the telephone directory, writing out an ad to be placed on a local bulletin board, checking the baseball scores—many can scarcely believe that this is "education." They begin to take it seriously only when the tutor points out the various new words, punctuations, letter combinations, or spelling discoveries that were encountered in the course of such a task.

So essential is the power of focused, present motivation that Vermont ABE home tutors are often faced with choices between easy-to-read material on irrelevant or obscure topics and highly topical material that theoretically is "too difficult" for the student. Nearly always they will encourage the student to try the latter, even if it means more work and more help, because whatever learning comes out of that material is going to be immediately usable and therefore can be connected with previous experience. Of course, there are limits to the use of highly unreadable material. One would not go on endlessly reading an encyclopedia article with a beginning student who could only grapple with every fifth or sixth word. However, one might suggest reading a little of it in each lesson, with the tutor reading the words that the student could not. The tutor could read it aloud to the student and then work together on finding words beginning with letters the student was working on, or sight-words, with a discussion of the meaning.

A Vermont student senses his own capacity and the tutor's support to read difficult material:

> LOU: *You don't start off reading books right off because it takes...you're so slow that you get bored before you get the message of a book or anything like that. But just to read the daily news or something like that, it's something you want to know about. Or a magazine you really want to know about, you can get in there and really get what you want to know. And (tutor) was great for that. That's the first day in—he started off giving me confidence. Without words, with actions—the best kinds.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 13)

When a home tutor went to do a lesson with a Vermont student on a mountain road, the tutor thought she had an appropriate lesson plan prepared, based on the student's work the previous week. But when she got there, the student and her child were clutching breadbags of fresh-picked blackberries. Pie was the only subject on the student's mind. So they found a recipe, made the pie, and, while it baked, they went over the fractions in the recipe and the words that had given the student trouble. (Finally, of course, they ate a piece of pie together!) This is the kind of immediacy of learning that enables students to amalgamate new learning with their experience.

"Readability" is nice, but it doesn't hold a candle to *interest* in the material. One Vermont student, who could read items in the New Readers Press *News for You* Edition A (simple) with struggle, had his trailer broken into several times while he was away at work, so he got two watchdogs. When his volunteer tutor brought a dog training book written for ordinary adult readers, he read the material with little difficulty. Genuine interest in the material seems to sustain students over what appear to be mountainous obstacles, given their general reading ability.

Thomas Schell divided a group of 50 adult volunteer learners in St. Louis into two groups to compare reading materials, using the same methods of instruction and same number of hours of instruction at the same intervals for both groups.

> The subjects in Group A worked in high-interest materials at or near their reading level, as established by the pretest. Subjects in Group B worked in materials chosen for their utility in daily activities (daily newspapers, magazines, driver's license forms, welfare forms, and job application forms). No particular attention was paid to the readability of these materials; however, it is probably safe to assume that nearly all of the materials were at a difficulty level higher than the mean reading grade level of the group.
>
> The results indicated: 1) Both groups showed gains in reading achievement from pretest to posttest. 2) Group B, using materials not graded in difficulty, had significantly greater gains than Group A. 3) Questionnaire tabulations showed that Group B had more positive feelings about their program of instruction and the gains they thought they obtained from the program; however the positive feelings were not found to have a statistically significant interaction with reading achievement.

> The findings of this study seem to further bear out those of Sticht and others, namely, that the discrepancy between reading achievement levels and readability levels is not nearly so important with adult readers as is their interest in the materials and their task motivation. The fact that both groups in this study showed gains indicates that planned, systematic instruction in reading can pay dividends to the learners involved; however, it also seems to show that no specially developed instructional materials are necessary. (Schell, 1974, pp. 103-104)

In other words, materials that were designed by an educational expert to be interesting to these adults and readable by those tested at their grade equivalency were somewhat less effective than live items of uncontrolled "readability" levels selected by the learners themselves. The crib that has to be built before the baby arrives, the lease that has to be signed by Thursday if the student is to retain an apartment, or the fish and game manual that must be digested to pass a test to get a hunting license before deer season starts next Saturday are "readable" materials to the adult who keenly wants and needs to read them. A Fry test that says (s)he won't be able to read them for 2.7 more grades is of no consequence.

How Is Literacy Learned?

How is literacy learned? — slowly, as all that has been said about resistance to change and about unlearning/relearning might suggest. A genuine hazard to the learning process is students' hope or expectation that progress will be steady and miraculous and that they will be readers by a week from Thursday. "All too often, they feel that you have a magic wand and you can wave it," Jonathan McKallip says. Jinx Crouch adds, "We feel the student should be oriented and that they should know it really isn't going to happen overnight" (McKallip and Crouch, 1979).

Experience in Vermont has shown, especially with volunteer tutors, that setting up this realistic but grim expectation is very difficult to do. There is a certain euphoria as a student and volunteer tutor begin to work together, composed of excitement that they both usually feel for quite different reasons. The energy of this euphoria will carry the learning process some weeks or even months, which is good because both the student and the volunteer tutor usually have some confidence problems to overcome. By the time the initial excitement cools, they often have become friends and stopped worrying about their competence so much. But the very beginning of the process is just not a time when a volunteer tutor, no matter how valuable (s)he may think it is, can introduce the sobering fact that learning to read will be terribly hard work, may take years rather than days, and will show progress at times and at others seem to be getting nowhere. The tutor does not want to say it for the same reasons the student does not want to hear it. The consolation is that, if the tutor and student become friends and settle in to work for as long as it takes, the tutor's loyalty to and confidence in the student can go a long way toward helping him or her through the periods of discouragement.

A learning environment that supports rather than hinders an adult student will affirm every moment of success for every learner and celebrate it until the learner takes up the celebration him/herself. Angus now reads on approximately a fourth grade level, if that means anything to anyone (it certainly doesn't to Angus). Consider what the celebration of his success has done for one who many would say reads at a barely acceptable standard.

ANGUS: *I love it that I can read now. Beautiful. It's a big difference, really. In a way, I feel like now I have to do something with my education, to get a good job, because I need to do something where I don't have to lift, anything very straining....I think my education is gonna help me get a better job. I think it is, because, I tell you, _____ Lumber Company isn't that way. If you worked, you worked. I was a laborer and that was it. I mean, you never got any better and you never got any worse.* (Cole, 1976, pp. 159-160)

For a student to move from "I can't" to "I think I might be able to," a crucial catalyst for all the other aspects of learning, (s)he must experience enough success to be convinced from within. Praise and affirmation have their place, but the student must perceive that they are appropriate in order to gain confidence from them. It is that actual experience of success—reading a word one had never managed before, writing out the first check that looks just like everyone else's checks, ordering something from Sears Roebuck (and getting it!), reading a menu and deciding what one wants from it, reading a story to a child before bed—that produces the solid awareness that one accomplished the thing. This convinces someone there is a glimmer of hope despite the conditioning to believe him/herself incompetent. And if I can do *this* little task, what if I try this one, and this one...?

What is the nature of the success that must accompany learning experiences if the student is to gain sufficient confidence and momentum to try new things? Who defines "success"? The student does. Little or no back-patting is required if the student accomplishes something (s)he has never done and acknowledges it. This is success felt in the bones, not registered on a progress chart nor measured in test scores. It is hands-on, present, and very tangible. When learning goals are set realistically and are specific, the student knows success when (s)he experiences it.

How is such success assured for someone who has experienced almost none of it in previous conscious learning efforts? It is assured by staying with student-generated (rather than program-generated or tutor-generated) goals; by including specific short-term goals among the long-range ones so that progress can be observed at short intervals; by doing numerous small activities in most lessons rather than one or two lengthy ones that may feel like failures if the student begins to have trouble when (s)he is tiring; by avoiding heavy-handed methods of correcting errors by going back to what the student does know and allowing her/him to build back toward the error until (s)he can identify and correct it alone; and by not pressing the student past his/her attention span, which may vary greatly depending on whether the children are home from school, the fuel-oil supply is nearly exhausted, or the flu is overtaking the household.

Learning for adults does not happen most successfully in an environment in which they feel they are being treated like children. Such an environment stresses what they are *unable* to do rather than acknowledging their dignity and accomplishments as adults. As Carman Hunter puts it:

> They seek out an educational program, for instance, ABE, and they don't realize what small steps progress comes in. So then they get in there, they get terribly discouraged, they get treated again, in *many* cases, as children. The teachers don't feel that they are, but they're sitting in rows in classrooms. (Hunter, 1979)

She further points out that the ABE teachers are often the same ones who teach kids during the day and keep the same attitudes when they come back in the evening.

Mr. X states clearly the feeling of many nonliterate adults about reading materials, classroom experiences, competitive groups, and the like.

> MR. X: *You just mentioned something about Dick and Jane. See, I've tried this before. I've tried to learn before. I was in a program up at the university, and that's exactly what happened. I found myself sitting at a table with a man in a tie and a jacket and myself and three little kids. Yeah, three kids, they put me in a class with kids. Do you know what that's like?—at the time I was 24, 25, and be put in a room with kids! Oh, I used to love it in school. The teachers knew I couldn't read, and then they'd ask me to stand up and read out loud! I tell you, I'd rather have the three biggest kids in the class punch me in the face than have to stand up and read out loud. I don't know, that's the kind of thing that you're up against. That's why, when you have a reading problem, besides the fact that you can't tell anybody, nine times out of ten, when you finally do go, you're insulted, you're embarrassed, they put you in with kids. You have to grit your teeth the whole time, which adds more anxiety, more tension, and makes it even harder.* (Curtis, 1979)

He adds:

> *I have found that this place* (Laubach Literacy) *has helped me more than any place I've ever been, and I haven't been made fun of, I haven't been put into a position where I felt ashamed or frightened. They've gone out of their way to help me....To all those people out there who can't read, I'd like to say this: I know they're not stupid, and they know they're not stupid. Give it one more shot. Try one more place. Because if they're like me, they've tried several, and have run their heads against the wall. Try one more time. Don't give up.* (Curtis, 1979)

It seems especially important to us that adult learning (and programs established to enable it) *not* fall into the trap of external measurements and motivations. Our bias against tests derives not only from the fact that they scare people for whom they were a source of panic and focused failure in school, but more important, they reinforce the illusion created in school that learning is basically done for reasons external to the student—to please someone who will let the student know how well (s)he is doing. If a student's goals are her/his own, there is no need for testing to determine whether they are accomplished: the student knows whether the directions to assemble the kids' Christmas toy worked or not, or whether the curtains fit the windows.

Closely connected with testing is an apparently irresistible urge to determine grade-levels for adults, inevitably introducing comparisons with other learners. Here, someone always has to lose, and probably everyone loses; even the "winner" is reinforced in supposing that his/her "success" consists in this score, rather than in getting something done in her/his own life. Harman observes:

> A common program deficiency resulting from the adoption of grade equivalencies is the transference of actual grade school curricula to adult courses. Although this

> approach facilitates both program organization and curriculum design, the main effect is that adult illiterates are often equated with children and treated as such. Furthermore, many teachers identify illiteracy with a lack of intelligence, an unwarranted and potentially counterproductive expectation. (Harman, 1970, p. 237)

How does literacy learning happen for adults? We believe that it happens most effectively in a comfortable environment where the student has to spend the least energy and anxiety on adjusting to the milieu. For many students, this would be the home. In a recent survey of background papers in adult education, James Broschart concluded:

> Most significantly, the adults studied in several of these major investigations were asked to name their *preferred learning* environment. The clear majority (55 percent) named their homes as the site most suitable to their needs; the job locale was a distant second choice (19 percent); and at the low end of the selection of sites only 3.5 percent named "school" as a "most suitable place" for undertaking their learning pursuits. (Broschart, 1977, p. 16)

People are comfortable at home. It's their turf. They do not have to adjust to someone else's milieu, etiquette, or schedule.

This does not mean that the home is the *only* "comfortable environment" for basic adult learning, but we have found that when tutoring services are made available in the home, many students enroll who "never got around to it" before.

> LOU: *You just sit down and learn how. And it was simple. Real simple. So simple I wondered why I waited so long. So, it's been on my mind a long time. Really it had. That year first I heard it they had it in the school, classes and stuff. You could go to night school and stuff like this. This was always on your mind, that it was too much of a hassle. And then when I found out that they came to the house, okay, then it could be your own secret. No one had to know nothin' and you're in your own surroundings. And that's, uh...the having it in your own surroundings, it makes it ten times easier. You don't have to admit nothing to nobody but one person.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 10)

Certainly there are occasions and situations in which the home is not the ideal environment. In the area of family support, home instruction has both pros and cons. On the one hand, unlike a tutoring situation in a "neutral" place such as a classroom or library, tutoring in the home usually reveals just what attitudes other family members have toward the learner's efforts. If they are positive, they can be enlisted in sustaining the energy needed for learning; if slightly negative, the tutor's own respect for and encouragement of the student may have a positive effect on others in the household. If the family is strongly negative, however, tutoring in the home sometimes exposes the student to pressure, ridicule, or even abuse, which creates tension and makes learning very difficult. At least the tutor knows what the score is; sometimes, it is possible to arrange to meet elsewhere for lessons.

It appears that basic literacy students are most comfortable in a one-to-one tutoring situation, where the pace is their own; no one but the tutor is aware of their errors, and there is none of the overt or covert competition that is a source of unhappy recollection for many. It

may be that the one-to-one situation increases the danger of dependence inherent in a transaction in which one person has the power (in this case, knowledge/skills needed by the other) and the other has little or none. The process is designed to empower and make the learner more self-sufficient; the effect, in some cases, has been to create yet another dependency—on the tutor.

To avoid this, both the tutor and student need to speak openly from the first of the student's eventual independence. (As the tutor of the student whose paragraph appears at the beginning of this paper put it, "I kicked him out of the nest.") Both—although perhaps at first the tutor more than the student—understand the need for a gradual transfer from a process generated by the "teacher" to one controlled by the student for her/his own learning and empowerment. One perceptive student observed:

> LOU: *When (home tutor) came I saved all of my questions for him. I just relaxed, done things the way I wanted to. If I wanted to write a letter I wrote it, just the way it sounded to me, and when (tutor) come I'd say, well, this is what I got to have today. He'd go through that letter and see where I misspelled and what I missed, words I misused and punctuation, and he'd correct that with me. The next time he come, if I wanted to know about percentages, that's what we worked on. So, I have made the education I got from (tutor), day by day that I'd meet him, work to fit into my business, so that I got the most out of it.* ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 12)

So much of the independence-creating process is evident here. The student (the same one who lacked the confidence to attend a night school class in a nearby town) is taking charge of his own learning, setting the agenda. What he is deciding to learn is not theoretical information or skills that he may someday need, but very pragmatic, day-by-day skills that he needs to run his small business. The student has gained the confidence to try new things, take the risk of making mistakes, and learn from the mistakes. At a certain point, the wise tutor simply manages to keep out of the way while a student gathers speed toward his/her own discovery.

With Whose Help Is Literacy Learned?

We firmly believe in the central importance of the "who" in the helping/tutoring role. A lot of people can pass on literacy skills. But the *unlearning*, the obstacles to overcome, and the lack of skills, self-esteem, and self-confidence require a tutor who can be articulate in explaining concepts and can give the learner support in beginning to see her/himself as one capable of learning, doing, and living a life in which (s)he can make choices. The learning environment needs to be staffed by caring people. Certification, curricula, and lesson planning all make a difference, but none of them probably matters as *much* as the caring. Angus was changed by it.

> ANGUS: *I used to try to hide the fact that I couldn't read. You try to hide it. It was just, I don't know what you would call it. In the back of your mind, they say, "Ah, he's stupid." People are gonna say he's stupid, he's dumb, he can't read. But really, people do not think that, I found out. They're not that way. People care, they really do. I mean, if they didn't care they wouldn't be helping me.* (Cole, 1976, p. 165)

What is the content of this "caring"? It is very specific and is sometimes manifested in tough ways, such as the volunteer who "threw (her student) out of the nest." It requires the flexibility of the tutor who arrived with the lesson plan prepared but had to let it go in favor of learning to read the recipe for a blackberry pie that simply had to be made. It requires the patience of Job, a basic acceptance of both the student and oneself as being involved as learners, of tenacious belief in the capacity of the student to learn and become more than (s)he is.

The tutor must see him/herself as a learner as well and be willing (but not compulsive) to share some aspects of her/his own life where learning is going on. The tutor must basically be a secure enough person so (s)he does not need to extract "strokes" from students to maintain his/her self-esteem; that is, (s)he must be able to handle a student's appreciation for help given but not to need to manipulate the student into expressing such gratitude. It is an essential part of the process of transferring energy from tutor to student so that the student can gradually stop seeing the tutor as a necessity to learning. The tutor must be committed to the student's increased and eventually total independence from her/himself. In our experience, the best tutors not only see themselves as learners, but do *not* see themselves as "teachers." People whose sense of identity makes them teachers tend to assume the information-imparting role with adult learners, rather than the partnership that, as soon as possible, relinquishes control of the learning situation to the learner.

These caring qualities are what we look for when interviewing prospective tutors. We look at their experience in working with people in various contexts, especially *not* in school. Have they made choices to work with people or with things? If with people, have they been in controlling, directive relationships? In interviews, we try to get a sense of what kinds of things they have done before that made them feel good about themselves. We posit several hypothetical situations in which home tutors sometimes find themselves and ask them how they think they would respond. There is no "right answer," although many people cannot be convinced of this and clearly continue to search for it and for the interviewers' approval; the intention is simply to get as much sense as possible of how a prospective tutor approaches people and the feelings (s)he has about her/himself in relationship to the people with whom (s)he will work.

So much of a tutor's job is not *teaching* as we normally think of it. People must be found who do not consider their morning wasted if a student who was doing a learning project on better ways of parenting lets go with a lot of pent-up feelings that have to do with his/her sense of inadequacy in being a parent, and little or no reading gets done that day. When students are choosing kinds of learning which directly affect their lives, the emotional involvement in those issues is always just under the surface, and the tutor must not only see the inclusion of that emotional level as important but must be able to deal with it as the student lets off steam. Learning is happening even though the student may not learn a single consonant digraph that morning. Kidd puts it this way:

> Adults are not just older than children; they have much more experience, and in consequence, feelings play an even larger part than in the learning of children. Gardner Murphy wrote: "The adult has not *fewer* but *more* emotional associations with factual material than do children although we usually assume that he has less, because the devices of control are more elaborate and better covered in the adult." The constellation of feelings associated with love (respect, admiration, generosity, sympathy, friendliness, encouragement) are of constant influence on learning. They

are much more powerful than constellations associated with rage and fear. (Kidd, 1976, p. 8)

For an adult learner, feelings are not just an awkward interruption in the learning process but essential to its impact and integration. This brings us, in considering how adults become literate, to the fact that the trust relationship is the keystone in tutoring. Any action on the part of the tutor that violates that trust—whether it be betraying confidentiality or manifesting some annoyance or amusement at the student's errors—will serve to render ineffectual all the good teaching techniques in the world.

Vermont home tutors have discovered that once many students have shared with them their inability to read and write well (for many, the central degrading fact of their life, around which all their other problems seem to revolve), an extraordinary level of confidence is created almost instantly. On the negative side, this has the potential for giving the tutor power over the student. On the positive side, it gives the learner someone with whom (s)he can risk being wrong, face the inevitability of making errors, and even come to see those mistakes as the very place where learning occurs. The freedom to stop hiding errors or pretend they do not happen and to accept and use them may be one of the most essential and exciting aspects of the whole process of becoming literate.

One home tutor talks about how he worked with Lou, the student quoted earlier:

> Initially I was doing a lot of bolstering of his confidence in himself and what he was able to do, and looking at the places in his life where he's been successful, and having him talk about that and so have him see that he could transfer some of those feelings about himself, and putting that into his seeing himself as someone who can read and write well. He got to trust me enough to know I wasn't going to point out those errors to show him how wrong he was or bad he was. But maybe I'd point them out if he didn't catch them so that he could correct it. And it was everything very positive. ("What If You Couldn't Read?," 1978, p. 11)

In summary, we believe that adults become literate by *unlearning* both cognitive and affective learned responses to situations involving them with written symbols. They do this by filling in the gaps they have in literacy skills and making connections between their skills and information and their life experience up to the moment. They come to ask their own questions of written material and go about getting them answered. They learn the new skills in the context of material, not simply of theoretical "high interest, low vocabulary," but related on a day-to-day basis to their actual problems, needs, questions, and aspirations.

They accept the fact that the process will probably be slow and are patient with themselves; they experience plenty of affirmation and celebration for their successes, which may come at first from other people but increasingly come from within the student as (s)he "owns" his/her competence. They experience success internally as a result of setting and reaching their own realistic short-term goals.

They are not being treated like children or otherwise made to feel ashamed. They are not being subjected to external measurements that prolong the illusion that learning is done to please or satisfy someone else. They learn in a comfortable environment where the highest

percentage of the learner's energy can be devoted to the material at hand, rather than to adjusting to a foreign environment governed by others' values and rules. Ideally, they are being helped individually, in a one-to-one situation with a tutor, with pace and subject matter determined by the individual learner. They gradually take charge of decisions about what will be learned, how, and when.

They discover, rather than being told, by building on what they already know, honoring the nonacademic kinds of learning they have done as adults, with the help of a caring person who is flexible, patient, committed to the student's self-reliance, and thinks of her/himself more as a learner than a teacher. They are in a trust relationship where it is not only acceptable to make mistakes and acknowledge them, but where the learner's inherent self-esteem is affirmed in spite of the mistakes, which are then seen as an opportunity for learning to happen.

4. DELIVERING ADULT BASIC EDUCATION: THE VERMONT ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM

From its inception in 1965 until 1974, the Adult Basic Education program in Vermont was not unlike other programs across the country funded by the Adult Education Act of 1966. Administered by monies funnelled through local school districts, the program was largely composed of evening classes held in public school buildings and taught by moonlighting or retired public school teachers. The federally required 10 percent match was provided at the State level from the General Fund, and local school district involvement in the program was largely bookkeeping, arrangements for space, and custodial services. Four learning centers—one for each of the four administrative regions—served as resource centers for area teachers and provided day and sometimes evening instruction for the more urban student populations. Despite a bounty system ($10 to students who recruited one other who attended three or more classes), enrollments steadily declined in 1972 and 1973, and the need for change seemed apparent.

Since then, the Vermont program has moved from parttime evening programs in school buildings to year-round programs using fulltime home tutors and large numbers of literacy volunteers. Most students are now served on a one-to-one or small-group basis in the home or other familiar setting. In 1977, nearly 62 percent of the students were served in the home. In 4 years, the program grew in size by over 105 percent. Most significantly, the program increased substantially the number and proportion of illiterate and functionally illiterate adults served at very little additional cost. In 1973, advanced-level students made up 45 percent of the total program, and in 1977, that group dropped to 17 percent of the total. In 1979, 66 percent of the students were served in the home; 14 percent of the students were at the advanced level. In 1973, there were 1,837 students enrolled. Nearly 5,000 students were served in 1979.

Beyond statistical growth, a few of the most significant results of this program integration include:

1. The notion of an individualized approach to ABE, inherent in home tutoring and volunteers and correspondence study. Homes and other "nonschool" locations are viable places for people to learn. "Coping skills," "functional literacy," and "decisionmaking" must be tied to an adult's real life, and tutoring is one of the best ways to do this.

2. The use of volunteers as an integral part of the State ABE program effort. Vermont entered into a cooperative agreement with Literacy Volunteers, Inc., of Syracuse, New York, 1 year before the U.S. Office of Education funded that organization as a staff development project. The agreement between Vermont and Literacy Volunteers became a model for other states and was instrumental in the development of training and support techniques for Vermont volunteer tutors.

3. The development of individualized correspondence study as a way of serving Level III adults (those students who are fairly advanced) in their homes. This led to the understanding that a materials development effort must be maintained as an integral part of the statewide program.

4. The notion that program resources should be tied directly to student need and that students at lower levels require more intensive and more expensive help. The Vermont alternative delivery systems have been developed as a response to this principle.

5. Links with higher education institutions in the State to give credit to teachers for what they are doing and learning on the job. This is based on the premise that students and teachers alike learn by doing.

Many of the delivery systems and concepts used in the Vermont ABE program were funded by the U.S. Office of Education as "special projects" over several years. Vermont developed and integrated them into the program statewide through a system that focuses all program pieces on a common goal.

How did all this come about?

In 1974, George Eyster began to write about the Appalachian home tutoring project, and the Office of Education made discretionary money available for ABE staff development activities. Vermont was part of the Region I Staff Development Project, but unlike most states in this and other regions, we elected to integrate "program" with "development" by locating the staff development project director with the ABE program director in the State Department of Education.

Interns from each of the four regions of the State were selected to participate in the staff development project. An arrangement with the School of Education at the University of Vermont provided each intern an opportunity to integrate her/his work in ABE with a graduate or undergraduate program. The academic goals around which each intern designed a university program read like a list of "If only I had the time to, I'd like to try...." It provided, perhaps somewhat inadvertently, the excuse for monthly discussions among a small fulltime staff for whom an environment of experimentation had been established. The discussions often related to the experiences of literacy programs in developing countries and the Appalachian project, as well as the more esoteric nature of learning.

Slowly but steadily, clear priorities and program commitments emerged from the discussions, and also from the success of individual projects that were, in effect, "special projects."

Serving illiterate adults was the first priority, and it became easier to look more directly and frankly at what our experience had shown. In any adult program, students' literacy levels directly affect cost: an adult with a low literacy level requires a great deal of instructor contact and is likely to face far more problems of transportation, work, childcare, health, money, energy, fear, and communications.

Our challenge was to be able to carry through on our commitments without shortchanging the more traditional students in adult basic education. The Federal adult basic education program is designed to serve anyone over age 16 who does not have a high school diploma and who lacks mastery of basic skills. Our program had to serve students at both extremes—the illiterates and the advanced GED-preparation students—as well as those whose ability fell between the two. It was especially important to us that we devise ways of helping students assume responsibility for themselves and for their own learning.

A wide range of services and options had to be made available in order for adults to have access according to their own particular needs and levels. Some delivery systems were more appropriate for serving low-level students and others more appropriate for higher level students. Our goal was to design a diversified system of service delivery to meet the needs of all adult learners.

Classes provided the least flexible alternative, although they were highly cost-efficient. TV and radio could reach many people, but they ask the student to adjust his/her life to broadcast schedules and, by themselves, provide little teacher support; this seemed viable only for high-level students. But the student could study whenever (s)he wanted and the teacher could provide many students with individual support by mail and telephone, thus making correspondence an appropriate system for rural adults who face many access barriers. Learning centers, open day and night and offering individualized programs, could serve many adults effectively in urban areas, but would obviously be less appropriate in rural areas where weather, geography, childcare, energy, and transportation are problems. Kitchen classes, home tutors, and volunteers seemed the most effective means for serving lower level adults who face all the problems inherent in poverty and rural living. These approaches offer one-to-one, personal teacher support, but are high in cost.

Adults who lack literacy skills probably cannot or will not go to a school or another public place to attend a class, either because of physical problems or out of fear of past failures. George Eyster's experience in Kentucky indicated that adults learn more rapidly in familiar surroundings.

For all these reasons, it seemed logical to serve adults with low literacy levels in homes, on an individual or small-group basis. Clearly, this would be an expensive program to maintain, but just as clearly it would be cheaper to take instructors to the students than to move large numbers of students to public places for programs of dubious value.

The monthly intern discussions, together with individual projects, led to program changes throughout the State. The development of a correspondence course for GED preparation students, the use of volunteers to provide intensive support and instruction for beginning students, and home tutoring for advanced-beginning and intermediate-level students were all intern projects. As experiments or projects succeeded in one or two regions, they, in various

ways, became part of another region's program response and, when appropriate, a statewide function.

The distinctions between staff development, special projects, and the program itself became less and less apparent. If we were to have described the program according to Federal definitions, we would have called the entire State a special project. As we gained experience and skill at home tutoring and kitchen classes, for example, the need for alternatives to commercial teaching materials became obvious. The correspondence course, too, required a broad range of interest- and skill-level-related materials that we could not afford to buy, even if they were available. An intern project to develop materials for teaching basic math generated an excitement for developing and sharing materials both for the correspondence course and for tutors working with less advanced students. Because tutors were working with individual students who had skills and knowledge worth sharing, they encouraged their students to write materials for other students.

When Right-To-Read Adult Academy money became available, a volunteer, two interns (one had become an area supervisor and another, the staff development project director), three home tutors, and the State director wrote a successful proposal to refine teaching techniques and methods for volunteers and home tutors and to develop materials for statewide use.

The Region I Staff Development Project was over in 1975. The authority for special projects and staff development was given over to the states. When the funds Nixon impounded were released, area supervisors agreed that the money would best be spent in one region to provide a core of fulltime home tutors. In another region, Right-To-Read later funded a similar core of tutors, as well as the refinement of techniques and development of materials. Yet another region experimented with parttime home tutors in combination with correspondence study and a volunteer program. The fourth region continued to provide evening classes with a few home tutors.

In 1976, monthly "Program Improvement Group" meetings replaced the intern meetings. Elected representatives from each of the regions, together with the area supervisors (and anyone else who wished to attend) met to exchange ideas, discuss policy-related issues, and advise on program development. The staff development project became the support for the Program Improvement Group, for statewide distribution of materials including the student newspaper, "The Green Mountain Eagle," and for the annual All-State meeting of ABE staff and students.

Perhaps the key to our success in changing the program has been the integration of a variety of methods to affect the redirections we wanted. Too often, program change and improvement are seen as the function of a single program area, such as staff development or special projects. Somehow we think that by just training better teachers, the program will improve and the students will be better served. But if teachers are trained to do their job differently, while the program environment stays the same, then the results of staff training are frustrated, to say nothing of the teachers. If we want teachers to work with students as individuals, then we must also create a system that makes that possible.

Our process was to integrate staff development and special project efforts so that we could affect not only the people in the system but the system itself. Our experience has convinced us that this kind of integration is a powerfully effective way to have immediate and continuous impact. Thus, if we wanted a teacher to seek out disadvantaged adult learners and provided staff development to help them do that, we also created a special project in which the teacher did not have an office with a desk, a chair, and a classroom.

In this way, the changes were made both from the inside and out. The teachers were being asked to respond to a new reality and were being given assistance in their adaptation. In the same way, many of these changes spread througnout the State. If one program change proved successful, then other programs were under pressure to adapt, in their own way, those successes. Special projects were integrated into the regular program, so that the change will be permanent and other programs will be under continuing pressure to adopt those changes. If a special project, or staff development, had been carried out solely by a university or other agency outside the regular program, then the changes and successes would likely have been short-lived and rarely adopted elsewhere.

We believe that the changes described in the beginning of this section are positive. There was a decline between 1973 and 1977 in the number of advanced GED students served, from about 1,000 to 500, but their enrollment had risen to almost 700 in 1979. The most dramatic increases were among the illiterate and functionally illiterate groups, whose enrollment jumped from about 800 to over 4,300 between 1973 and 1979.

We also have a great deal of confidence in the process we used—the integration of staff development and special project activities. This has been an effective catalyst and should allow us to continually adjust the program to better meet the needs of students.

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